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OR,

The Queer Affair at Tombstone.

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SOL," "HAPPY HANS," "THE SILVER
SPORT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TARANTULA OF TOMBSTONE.

A wiry Indian pony was trotting briskly along a dusty trail a short distance from the famous mining-town of Tombstone. It was in the earlier and wilder days of that town, when men's heads were turned by reports of marvelous silver discoveries, and the trails were crowded with eager fortune-hunters.

The rider of the pony was not of this class. He was dressed in cowboy garb, and there was nothing in his air to betoken the half-

"YAH—YAH—YAH! BE YOU MARSA TOM-CAT?" A FIGURE, THE STRANGEST HE HAD EVER SEEN, DROPPED FROM THE LIMBS OF A TREE.

crazed silver-seeker. His face was intelligent, but not handsome. His eyes revealed his character. They were bright and penetrating, and indicative of a curious combination of cool courage and precipitate recklessness.

What would first attract the beholder, however, was his cap. It was a singular affair, made of gray catskin, with the mounted head serving as a visor, and the tail curling about like a plume.

In fact, the rider was none other than the celebrated border character, once a cowboy, and now known throughout Silverland as the Texas Tom-cat."

After a little he drew the pony down to a walk, took a letter from an inner pocket of his coat, and read it over slowly and carefully.

"Sharp as a steel-trap, Pendergast is, but I s'pose he can't get his rope over the horns o' this thing he calls an 'affair.' So he sends fer the Tom-cat. Didn't 'low I'd ever have to redeem that promise. But, hyer I am, claws an' all, ready fer bizness. It makes me feel good to wear this ole cap ag'in. Molly don't want me to wear it any more, but I jist have to, in a case like this. Wouldn't meet no luck ef I didn't. I do hope, though, fer her sake, that thar won't be nothin' ser'us happen!"

His voice softened, and he became silent and thoughtful.

The letter, dated at Tombstone, ran as follows:

"MY DEAR TOM-CAT:—

"When I visited you at your home in Silver City, in return for certain favors you made me a promise. I little thought how soon I would ask you to redeem it. I am mixed up in an affair now that calls for immediate unraveling. If any one can do it, you are the man. Come at once, that justice may be done to an innocent and injured party.

"Your friend, JULIAN PENDERGAST."

"Yah—yah—yah! Be you Marsa Tom-cat?"

A figure, the strangest he had ever seen, dropped from the limbs of a tree that overhung the trail, and planted itself in his pathway.

The pony snorted and attempted to wheel about, and the Tom-cat's hand involuntarily sought his weapons.

The figure was that of a negro, with a hideous black face and wide red lips. At first glance he looked squat and short, with disproportionately long arms and legs. A further scrutiny corrected the impression. He was of the average height, but his body was ball-like and preternaturally large, making his arms and legs seem extremely long and thin by comparison.

The Tom-cat's hands left his weapons, and he thrust the letter into his pocket.

"Who air ye, an' what d'ye want?" he asked, not exactly liking the appearance of the negro. "You 'most skeered this bronc' into a fit!"

"Hel' hel' hel' came from the wide, red lips. "Dat hoss am a skeery creeper, to be sho'! Be you Mawster Tom-cat?"

He advanced, as he spoke.

"Yes! That air's my handle."

"I knowed you, boss, by yo' cap. Dis am a quah country we got out yeh! You de Tom-cat 'case you w'a'dot cap. An' I se de Tombstone Tarant'la 'case I look like a big, black spideh. Missy call me so, anyhow!"

"I allus did hate tarant'lys!" muttered the Tom-cat, under his breath. "An' ef he don't look like one o' them pesky, red-mouthed spiders, then I never seen one!"

"Missy want you teh call an' see her. She lib in de fu'st white house at de aidge ob town. Little squah house, look lack't migh' be a bahn! But, 'tain't no bahn. She wants to 'vise wid you 'bout dish yeh bizness what you 'gaged in. She know what you done come foh, an' she want see you 'bout hit."

"What does she want?" demanded the Tom-cat, who feared a trap. "What's her name?"

"Her shuah 'nuff name I don' know!" replied the negro, with a deferential bow. "Call hersef Madame Dumar. Berry 'portant lady, I kin tell you!"

"Does she know a young lawyer whose name's Pendergast?"

"Spec' not! 'Case why she on'y come to dis yer' place las' week. But, she know you, an' know yo' name. Look 'cross mountains, in big lookin'-glass, missy did, an' she see you comin' on dat 'ah hoss. So she say to me: 'Trant'ly! yeh comes de Tom-cat. You go out an' meet 'im. An' you tell him be sho' an' come to see me. Bizness berry p'tickleh. Ef he don' come, dis affair what he's 'gaged in is sho' boun' to fail!"

The cowboy—as I shall term him—was mystified. His curiosity was excited, too. How did this Madame Dumar know that he was coming? And, how did she know anything about "the

affair" which had brought him to Tombstone. He knew almost nothing about it, himself. In answer to the queries came the suggestion that she must be in the confidence of Pendergast. Perhaps she was his friend and ally. He might even find Pendergast at her residence.

"You gwine go?" questioned the negro, who was watching him intently.

"Yes," replied the Tom-cat, roused from his reverie. "I 'low I might's well. But, mind you, ef they's any tricks played, thar'll be a dead nig round hyer. The Texas Tom-cat'll come fer ye with claws a-stickin' out, an' eyes a-shinin'! Ye never heered me howl, I reckon?"

He stared fiercely at "the nig," and gave utterance to a series of most discordant yowls.

The Tarantula, with a yell of terror, bounded into the bushes and disappeared.

Seeing that the darky did not intend to return, the cowboy touched up his pony, and rode on, laughing.

In a little while he caught sight of the square white house which Madame Dumar's strange messenger had described, and, recalling the appearance of that individual, a queer thrill shot through him.

The Tom-cat was very far from being a coward. But it is one thing to confront an open and known danger, and quite another to advance upon one that is masked in the garb of secrecy and mystery.

His recklessness impelled him, however, as it usually did on important occasions.

"Hang the thing!" he exclaimed. "I ain't afeard of it, I ain't, whatever it is! Ef thar's any galoot in that shanty a-settin' up a job on me I'll down 'im. An' I ain't afeard o' a woman."

A flush came to his cheeks.

"That is, not o' a fightin' woman! But one o' these soft, purty, purty women gits away with me. I've been married to Molly a-goin' on two year, come nex' round-up, an' I'm 'most as skeery of a petticoat as I ever was!"

To divert his thoughts, he drew out his weapons, examined them, and clicked the cylinders around to see that they were in working order.

The house was now at hand. Dropping a revolver into each side-pocket of his coat, to have them ready in case of surprise, he dismounted, hitched the pony, and walked leisurely up to the building.

It was a square, ugly structure, and looked as if it might some day have been used as a mine building. There was no garden attached to it, no beds of flowers, nor anything to relieve it of its plainness, and lend attraction to its surroundings.

Still the place appeared to be occupied. There were cheap curtains at the two staring windows, and the grass-plot in front of the door had been recently trampled.

The Tom-cat noticed all these things, and they did not bestow a sense of security.

But he had gone too far to retreat, even if his curiosity and recklessness would have permitted him to. Boldly ascending the steps, he rapped loudly on the door, and grasped the handles of the revolvers in his pockets, as he awaited the answer to his summons.

He heard a quick movement and a sound of shuffling feet. Then the door opened and he stood face to face with a lady, heavily veiled and dressed in black.

"H'm! Mornin'!" said the cowboy, clearing his throat and almost at a loss for words. "I'm the Texas Tom-cat! I seen yer spider—I mean yer Trant'ly down the trail and I—"

"Come in!" she replied, in a low, soft voice.

"I knew you would come. My horoscopes never fail me. I saw you from here when you left Silver City and I made up my mind I would speak to you."

"That's a lie!" thought the Tom-cat, as he stuffed the catskin cap down on top of one of the revolvers, and proceeded to follow her. "She couldn't do that, 'cause Silver City's many a long mile from hyer, an' thar's mountains atween!"

She led the way into a darkened room; and, while the Tom-cat was fingering his weapons in momentary expectation of some mysterious attack, she proceeded to illuminate the apartment by igniting a curious compound that gave out a sickly, greenish glare.

An owl with a rattlesnake in its talons, both stuffed, stood on a sort of mantle; and a black cat, very much alive, purred at and rubbed the feet of the cowboy.

"Cuss the thing!" he yelled, in a kind of nervous horror, springing back. "It gives me the creeps!"

"Why, I supposed you were a lover of cats, judging by the name!" she said, in her low voice.

"I am, ma'am, sometimes! But not at this identical minute!"

For the time his superstitious fears quite overcame his natural bashfulness. It was such an eerie, uncanny place!

"The Tarantula told you to come here!" she continued. "He leaped out of a tree across the ridge there, and delivered my message. I saw him, just as I saw you when you left Silver City. You have come to assist Julian Pendergast. He imagines he is called upon to fight the battles of what he terms outraged and injured innocence. He don't know what way to turn; and so he sends for you."

"Take my advice: If you aid him it will result in your death!"

The Tom-cat was so astounded that he knew not what to say.

"How d'ye know?" he at last managed to stammer. "Air you 'quainted with the gen'leman?"

Then, emboldened by the sound of his own voice:

"Why sh'ud I b'leeve it? Mebbe it's like that air yarn 'bout seein' me in Silver City. I couldn't swaller that, ye know! Not while my head-piece is in good workin' order. Beggin' of yer pardon fer sayin' so, ma'am!"

"Son of mortal!" she cried, drawing herself up, tragically. "Do you doubt the words of Madame Dumar, the prophetess, the reader of stars, the revealer of past and future events? Know, then, that I am the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, and that the very stars in their courses whisper to me the secrets of mankind. Come, look here!"

She clutched him by the arm and led him unresistingly in front of the leaping green flame. Just before him was a mirror-like surface of water.

"Look into that pool and tell me what you see?"

The cowboy strained his eyes into the crystal depths. Then, started back with a cry of horror.

What he saw seemed a picture of himself, stretched on the ground in the agonies of death.

"Behold your fate, if you pursue the course you have marked out. The horoscope tells me you will pursue it, and that that will be your end. The stars whispered to me to warn you! I have done so, but I much fear you will not heed it. I can see no chance for you unless you, this hour, turn back upon your trail."

The cowboy could bear no more. With a wild howl, he started from the room and from the house. As he mounted his pony he realized that the sweat was streaming from every pore and that he was trembling violently.

CHAPTER II.

TOM-CAT'S TRIAD.

FOR a moment the Tom-Cat hesitated as to the course he should pursue. But the clear sunlight drove out of his brain the horror of the greenish mists from which he had fled; and the old daring and recklessness returned. The white light of noonday is a wonderful dispeller of superstitious fears.

"Hanged ef I'll go back!" he declared, setting his teeth firmly. "I'd be 'shamed of myself the longest day I lived. That bizness is all fol-de-rol. Thar' can't be nothin' in it, fer all it's so queer and skeery. Wonder who she is? Mebbe Pendergast kin tell me!"

He set spur to the pony and dashed down the trail and into the town, scarcely daring to look back at the little white house for fear his courage might wane.

It was no difficult matter to find Pendergast's office, for it was on the main street and a gilt sign swung over the door.

The young lawyer responded to his rap, "Ah!" he cried, extending a hand warmly. "Its Tom-cat! Come in! We were just speaking of you!"

Then the cowboy saw that there was a lady in the office.

"I'd ruther not!" backing away. "I'll put up my pony, and then we'll talk."

He was gone before Pendergast could explain.

"He'll be back in a little while!" the young lawyer observed, with a smile, as he re-entered the office. "As brave as a lion, but bashful to timidity in the presence of ladies."

"Perhaps I'd better go, then!" with an amused look.

"Not at all! He must meet you. I want to interest him in your behalf and your presence will aid in that as much as my words."

His manner and actions showed that they were lovers

And they seemed well adapted to each other. She was slight and fair, with a pleasant but not strictly beautiful face. It had in it, however, the beauty of intelligence and purity. On the other hand he was tall, dark and muscular.

It was almost a half-hour before the Tom-cat returned. Then, he did not come directly to the office, but hovered about the corner opposite, as if uncertain what to do.

Pendergast went across to him, spoke a few words and took him by the arm.

When they entered, the cowboy made a great effort to appear nonchalant, but it was a signal failure.

"Allow me to present you to Miss Devore!" said Pendergast, anxious to relieve his friend's embarrassment. "Miss Devore, the Texas Tom-cat! Tom-Cat, this is Miss Dell Devore, the young lady I mentioned as needing your assistance."

The Tom-cat could not remember that a young lady had been mentioned, but he thrust his cap into one of his capacious pockets, sunk into a chair and said nothing.

"Now that we're acquainted let's get to business!" Pendergast suggested, with professional briskness. "Just in, I suppose, and nothing to recount in the way of adventures?"

This set the cowboy's tongue to going; and, with many uneasy shiftings, he related what had befallen him. His hearers were puzzled and astonished.

"I've heard there is a fortune-teller in town, but, I didn't know she lived there. I thought the building was unoccupied. You didn't get to see her face?"

"No!" replied the Tom-cat.

"I suppose the Tarantula, as he calls himself, is only a deformed negro," continued Pendergast. "But, that woman's knowledge surpasses belief. How she discovered the facts mentioned rather gets me. I never told a soul, expect Miss Devore."

"And you may be sure I didn't repeat it!" asserted the young lady, earnestly.

"But, what about the green fire an' the picture in the water?" questioned the cowboy, haunted by the mysterious affair.

"The fire is easy enough. Some compound that gives out a greenish light in burning. And the other is base trickery. Of course it's impossible for any one to foretell the future."

"Of course!" repeated the cowboy, as if not at all sure of it.

"Why, you don't mean to let that scare you into going back on your promise?"

The tone, the implied doubt of his plighted word, settled it. After that, the cowboy sternly put the mysterious affair behind him and set his face in the direction of what he conceived to be his duty.

"Pardon me! I ought to have known you wouldn't think of such a thing!"

"And, now, let me lay before you the business in hand. I will preface it by confessing that I don't know what to do."

"To begin with: Silas Taulbee is in possession of mining property which belongs to Miss Devore. Her father, David Devore, owned the Phoenix Mine, near this place, and Taulbee was his foreman. Mr. Devore died, some three months since, and Taulbee entered into possession under a will which we believe to be forged, but which we cannot prove to be."

"The difficulty is that we cannot establish the fact that this young lady is Devore's daughter, or that he was David Devore. Here he passed under the name of Thomas Templeton."

"He was forced to leave the East for a crime he never really committed, and here he assumed the name of Templeton to conceal his identity. He accumulated wealth, and held it in the name of Templeton. He corresponded with his daughter in that name."

"When she learned of his death she came here with letters and papers which would have proved all these things. Believing Taulbee an honest man, she went to him and laid the papers before him, thinking he would relinquish possession as soon as he learned the truth. He seized upon the papers and turned her into the street, branding her as a crank."

"When she threatened to make him trouble he denied that he had taken any papers from her, and had her locked up on a charge of lunacy."

"The skunk!" howled the Tom-cat, unable to control himself longer. "Ef I'd 'a' been 'round hyer 'bout then he'd 'a' heerd some cat-music that he wouldn't fergit in a hurry."

"No doubt!" asserted Pendergast. "I wish you had been."

The grateful look that the young woman cast upon the cowboy, at this expression of sympathy,

caused him to collapse and listen with mute attention to the continuance of the story.

"In committing her to prison he doubtless set a trap for her, which, in her terror and distress, she fell into all too readily. On the very first night the door of her cell was left slightly ajar. Believing it an oversight on the part of the jailer, and that if she remained she would undoubtedly be committed to an insane asylum, she slipped out of the cell, and without much difficulty escaped from the place."

"In doing this, of course, she acted unwisely and played into the hands of her enemies. She would have been released when brought up for examination. But she did not think so; and fled."

"The next day the body of a woman was found in the hills. I suppose it was the body of some poor creature who had become lost, and perished. The body was brought to town, identified by Taulbee and some of his tools as that of Miss Devore, and buried."

"A day of wandering gave Miss Devore time for cooler reflection, and she returned, determined to begin a legal fight for her rights."

"She came to me; and when I examined into the case I found it hadn't a leg to stand on. You see, the coroner's jury had decided her dead. Taulbee and his tools stood ready to swear that the body buried was that of Miss Devore; and I couldn't find a person to testify that it wasn't, or even to identify her."

"I might have brought witnesses from the East for that purpose. But even to establish that fact would not win the case. If I could prove that she is David Devore's daughter, I could not prove that David Devore was Thomas Templeton. Taulbee had possession of that evidence, and ere this has, no doubt, destroyed it."

The indignation of the honest cowboy was great. He knew that the story was true. The face of the lady before him showed that she was incapable of so great a falsehood.

"Now, we'll return to the Tarantula of Tombstone and the mysterious prophetess!" proceeded Pendergast, noting, with great satisfaction, the effect of his words. "Is it not plain that somebody has reason for wishing you to return to Silver City, without looking into this affair? This fortune-teller said the stars warned her to order you to do so, and that a terrible death would befall you if you did not. That's bosh, of course!"

"In my opinion, she is in the employ of Taulbee. He discovered in some way that I had sent for you; and, fearing the result, got her to work upon your superstitious fears with a lot of flummery and fire-works, believing it would drive you from the trail. Most cowboys are superstitious, you know; and he didn't think you would prove an exception to the rule."

"As for the Tarantula, no doubt he is the woman's negro servant."

The Tom-cat was flattered; and the explanation was so clear that it swept from his mind the last vestige of doubt.

"I'm with ye!" he cried, extending his hand, enthusiastically. "I'm with ye; claws an' all. Jest tell me what you want and I'll go fer that air Taulbee hot!"

"I knew you would!" with a grateful pressure of the hand. "Allow me to thank you for Miss Devore, as well as for myself. But, you forget. You are to find the trail. I confessed at the outset that I didn't know what to do. We, both of us, place ourselves under your guidance. You must show us the way out."

The cowboy stared.

"Yes; you are the leader. We are simply followers. Or, if you like it better, we will call ourselves equals."

"The Tom-cat's Triad! That expresses it."

"Shake ag'in!" said the cowboy. "I ain't a-keerin' fer a name, but I'm with you both to the bitter end. Ef thar ain't a way to git at this hyer Taulbee, why we'll make one!"

The young lady left the office soon after, but Pendergast and the Tom-cat remained there the greater part of the day planning and plotting and outlining their proposed work.

And through it all, wholly unknown to them, the Tarantula of Tombstone, like a great, black spider, was crouched among some barrels beneath the rear window, apparently sunning himself and sleeping away the hot hours of the afternoon.

CHAPTER III. INTO THE DEPTHS.

In accordance with the plans outlined, the cowboy sought for and obtained work at the Phoenix Mine. If Silas Taulbee suspected him, no sign of it was manifested, unless the fact that

the Tom-cat was placed at very hard labor can be considered such a manifestation.

When two days had passed and the cowboy had accomplished nothing, Julian Pendergast determined to pay a visit to the mysterious woman who claimed to possess clairvoyant powers. He was firmly convinced that she was in Taulbee's confidence, and hoped to learn something that he could turn to Miss Devore's benefit.

The cowboy was at the Phoenix Mine when Pendergast made this resolve, and he did not think it necessary to delay a day in order to acquaint him with it. It might have been better for Pendergast had he done so.

Arming himself to be prepared against treachery, he set out for the house. A few minutes' brisk walking brought him to it. It was in the condition which the Tom-cat had described: apparently deserted, but occupancy shown by the curtained windows and the trampled grass-plot.

A couple of young women, of the lower classes evidently, slipped out and away by a side-path, as he advanced. Doubtless they were foolish and superstitious creatures, who, having encountered trouble, had visited the pretended prophetess for the purpose of having the impenetrable future revealed to them.

Pendergast was rather ashamed to be seen there, and shrunk behind a scrubby tree to escape observation.

When they disappeared he again advanced, and knocked at the heavy door.

It was opened in the course of a few moments by the prophetess herself, heavily veiled and dressed in black, as the Tom-cat had seen her.

Pendergast scrutinized her closely as he entered, but that veil was a Chinese wall of seclusion. There was no penetrating it. As for the Tarantula, he was nowhere to be seen.

"A secluded place you have here!" he ventured, for the purpose of hearing her talk. He hoped he might detect some familiar accent in her voice.

"Yes," she replied, simply. "It is very quiet."

"You have not been here long?" questioningly. "I supposed the house unoccupied, until the other day. Your name is new, too. Dumar, I believe? Madame Dumar?"

For some reason she did not lead him into the darkened chamber, but into a little box-like ante-room. At least that was what he took it to be. There was some drapery about the corners of the walls; and it was a singular-looking place, he acknowledged, even for an ante-room. He could not resist the feeling that it was something of a cage. But this passed away as she sat down opposite and began to answer his questions.

"Yes; that is my name. I am quite a stranger here. Have been here but little over a week. I suppose you came to have your fortune told."

"You cannot tell it!" he declared, leaning back in his chair and eying her closely. "That is a power given to no one."

"So they all think, until I prove it!" with a musical laugh. "In the first place, your name's Julian Pendergast, and you are a lawyer."

"A fact not very difficult to discover!" was the quick retort.

"Perhaps not. Most of them come here to consult me about love affairs. You are in love, but you did not come for that purpose."

"Pray, what did I come for, then?"

His mental query was:

"How does she know whether I'm in love or not? I haven't even told the Tom-cat that!"

"You came to see if you could discover anything that would assist you in a certain case, in which your client is your sweetheart. You are leagued with an ex-cowboy, known as the Texas Tom-cat. Your sweetheart's name is Dell Devore. You three have combined to accomplish a certain purpose; and you call yourselves the 'Tom-cat's Triad!' Is it not so?"

The statements were startling, and revealed a wonderful knowledge. He could not understand how she had gained it, and was resolved not to believe her pretended miraculous powers. His amazement was plainly revealed in his eyes.

"Still a doubter?" she cried, laughingly. "I see that I will have to tell more. Then, perhaps, you will believe that it is as easy to reveal the future as to call up a past which I can have had no opportunity of penetrating."

With this she plunged into a detailed account of all that was said in the young lawyer's office at the Tom-cat's first visit.

"You go beyond me!" he confessed, awed and mystified in spite of himself. "I don't know how you gained your information. Of course I can't believe that you discovered it in the way

you claim. Pardon me, please, for the doubt. Perhaps I ought to believe it, but my education is against such a thing. It's impossible; and we'll not argue the point."

A sort of fear had also mixed itself with this awe and mystification. This woman, whom he believed to be leagued with Silas Taulbee, had penetrated the secrets of the recent past. What was to hinder her from continuing it? The Triad would be forced to work at a terrible disadvantage if their plans were to become, as soon as matured, the property of their enemies. They could never thwart Taulbee, in that event.

"Why do you wear a veil?" he asked, with sudden energy.

The query annoyed her.

"An ungentlemanly question!" she asserted. "Because I choose to. I am told there is no law against it."

He had been listening closely to every word, but could detect nothing familiar in her voice. But that was not strange. He was acquainted with but few of the women of Tombstone. And besides, the fortune-teller might have come from a distance.

"No! I suppose not!" replying to her assertion. "But the question was prompted by a very natural curiosity."

"I suppose you came to have your fortune told?" questioningly.

"Well! yes! I reckon I might as well!"

"One dollar, please. I always demand the fee in advance."

"So this is not a charitable institution?" with a light laugh, as he extracted a dollar from his purse.

"Quite the contrary. It is not best for people to look into the future. If they will, I make them pay for the privilege. Your hand, please!"

She dropped the dollar into the pocket of her black dress, and began to examine the palm of his extended hand.

"I thought the victim looked into a pool, or something of the sort!" with an amused smile.

"Ah! The Tom-cat told you that! And a gruesome sight he saw. You shall look soon, if you wish."

Then, bending over the palm:

"I would rather not tell you, sir, what I see here!"

Her tones chilled him.

"Oh, go on!" he cried, with an attempt at bravery. "You have the fee, and I can stand it. But don't draw the lines too black!"

"I see," she said, holding the hand away from her and staring at it fixedly, "a man in the last stages of starvation. He is wasted, emaciated, famine-stricken. The skin clings to his bones like cracking leather; his clothes are torn into rags; and his hollow eyes burn with the fierce glare of insanity. And around and over him, as he lies helpless, swarm legions of rats, ready to devour him as soon as the breath leaves his body. That man is Julian Pendergast!"

She cast the hand from her and arose.

"Oh, it was terrible. Let me prepare the magic pool. Maybe it will reveal some way of escape."

Pendergast, scarcely able to control his unstrung nerves, leaned heavily back in his seat, as she turned to leave the little, box-like room.

To his surprise and alarm, she was no sooner out of the place than the door clanged to and locked and the room commenced to sink. Down, down, it went, with dizzy swiftness.

"Ha! ha! ha!" came the voice of this female fiend. "You will believe the prophetic, Julian Pendergast, when the rats gather to gnaw your bones!"

Then he knew that an elevator-like arrangement was carrying him into the depths of some abandoned mining-shaft.

Springing to his feet he rushed to the drapery-concealed corners. In one of them was a speeding chain cable. But he found he could not stop the descent of the cage by means of it. He was powerless!

Then his cries rung loud and wild; and, in his desperation, he beat his fists against the hard-wood walls until they were lacerated and bleeding. And still the cage descended into the unknown and terrible depths!

CHAPTER IV.

A DISGUSTED TOM-CAT.

"THIS hyer bizness don't suit me a-tall!" muttered the Tom-cat, with some warmth, as he mopped his face and walked away, in the cool evening air. He had just come into the outer life and light from the depths of the mine

where he had been breaking his back and exhausting his strength handling heavy ore.

"I wasn't cut out for a miner! Chasin' stampedes an' ropin' steers and brandin' mavericks an' sich is my best holt. Ef I hadn't gone into this thing with my eyes wide open, I'd pull up my picket-pin an' light out. Minin's a dog's work, an' no mistake!"

"An', besides, I ain't doin' no good. An' I can't do no good down in that dark hole. An' when I come up I'm so tuckered an' beat out that I ain't got no life to do the shadder trick with. I couldn't give a good healthy 'meow' to save me. I like to go at things a-screechin' and chargin'! That's my way. An' it's the only way to 'complish anything. But you can't do that hyer. Thar's nothin' to screech an' charge at!"

The Tom-cat's disgust was deep and genuine. For five days he had toiled in the gloom and darkness, hoping that he might learn something from the miners regarding Taulbee, or the late David Devore. From appearances he might go on toiling there forever and be none the wiser on those points. The miners knew nothing; or, if they did, they also knew how to keep that knowledge.

It was very discouraging; and the Tom-cat was quite at his wits' ends. At Pendergast's request he had undertaken to unravel the tissue of crime and falsehood with which Taulbee had screened himself. It was the Tom-cat's theory that the papers taken from Dell Devore were still in existence; and he hoped to obtain some clue to lead him to them. In default of this he believed it possible to implicate Taulbee in some crime that would drive him to a confession of this offense to shield himself from punishment for the other.

This belief was founded on a theory that did credit to the Tom-cat's discernment. Few men leap at once into gigantic crimes. The great crimes are approached by a long gradation of lesser offenses. The baseness that prompted him to the wrong against Dell Devore, was the legitimate result of other wrongs committed. If one or more of these could be discovered and traced to him he would doubtless surrender the property to its rightful owner to escape exposure.

The plan was a good one. He had applied for and obtained work, so that he might be near Taulbee. And had been sent into the bowels of the earth, where he scarcely ever saw or heard of him.

"This hyer bizness don't suit me a-tall!" he repeated. "I can't make no headway. I've a good mind to march right into Taulbee's office, poke a pistol under his nose and make him own up to this bit o' devilment. I may have to yit! An' when I do show my claws I'll purceed to rip his black skin in ruther a lively way, ef he don't talk straight."

"Hello! Thar's the Tarant'ly! Now, what's he snoopin' 'round fer, I wonder?"

The negro was dodging from point to point, but whether he was following the cowboy or not the latter could not tell. He might not have known of the Tarantula's proximity, if the swollen, rounded body had not leaped across a bar of light that came from the window of a miner's cottage.

The Tom-cat slipped his hands upon his weapons and walked on, apparently unconscious of the negro's presence.

"Another critter doin' the shadder trick. An' this time it's me that's bein' shaddered. Makes a feller feel kind o' squeamish an' onsart'in; like follerin' a stamped an' expectin' to be pitched onto yer head every minnit. A shadder bein' shaddered! Now, what d'ye s'pose he wants? Should think he wouldn't keer to come near me ag'in, the way he run when I screeched."

But for some time he saw no more of the Tombstone Tarantula.

Making his way into the busier portion of the town, he turned toward Pendergast's office. To his surprise, the young lawyer was absent. This he could not understand, for Pendergast had made an appointment to meet him there on that evening and at that hour.

"Never knowed the young chap to be late afore," mused the Tom-cat, seating himself on the steps.

But the minutes passed, and Pendergast did not come.

Then the Tom-cat became alarmed, and sought for him at his boarding-house. He recalled the shadowy figure that had been, apparently, following him, and the memory brought unpleasant suggestions. Perhaps Pendergast had been waylaid by the Tarantula and slain! The young lawyer had been very positive in the belief that the negro was one of

Taulbee's tools. And if the Tarantula had slain Pendergast, might he not be following the cowboy with similar intentions?

The Tom-cat glared about in the gloom as he thought of this.

"Ef he shows his black head hyerabouts I'll purceed to punkcher it," he gritted. "I've stepped on t'rant'lys afore to-day, an' he'll find that my foot ain't growed any lighter. Whether it's human er animile, thar's allus p'izen meanness in a t'rant'ly!"

The information gained at the young lawyer's boarding-house was not quieting.

"He hasn't been seen for three days!" said the proprietor, "and no one seems to know what has become of him. He told nobody he was going. I have become somewhat alarmed about it."

"Tain't like Pendergast to puckachee 'thout sayin' a word to his friends," declared the Tom-cat. "Thar's dirt hyer—heaps of it! An' it's my solemn belief that he's been put out o' the way by a certain dark-complected chap that I ain't ready to name yit."

"You surprise me," exclaimed the proprietor. "Who could have cause for putting him out of the way, as you express it?"

The Tom-cat was not ready to explain the grounds of his opinion.

"I kin o'ny say it's my solemn belief!" he declared, and backed away to prevent further questioning.

Pendergast might be somewhere in town, he thought. So he made a tour of the saloons and business houses, returning finally to the office.

"Thar's on'y one other place!" he mused.

"An' shorely he wouldn't stay thar, when he knows 'at I'm waitin' fer him. I'll call on Miss Devore; an' ef he ain't with her, I'll know certain he's been killed er sperited away."

And this was the answer that came to his questioning, when he asked for that young lady:

"Miss Devore? Why, we haven't any earthly idea what's become of her. She has mysteriously disappeared."

The Tom-cat was staggered. He could not understand it. Was it possible that Pendergast and his sweetheart had both been slain? It seemed too horrible for belief!

Just then he noticed the Tombstone Tarantula writhing toward him through the shrubbery.

The cowboy had left the house and was standing, a few rods away, in the shadows of some trees. There could be no doubt that the negro was advancing upon him.

Stepping behind the trunk of one of the trees, the Tom-cat drew his weapons and awaited the black's approach.

Then he leaped out upon the Tarantula, screaming:

"Whoop! Mariar! Sp't! sp't! sp't! mee-ow-ow!"

It was the Tom-cat's well-know war-cry.

CHAPTER V.

A SUGGESTIVE PICTURE.

THE second day after Pendergast's disappearance from the public view, Miss Dell Devore was sitting at the window of her room, on the ground floor, staring dreamily into the garden. Her mind was pre-occupied and ill at ease. Julian Pendergast had promised to call on her the previous evening, and had failed to keep his promise. Consequently she was filled with gloomy forebodings.

She had no thought of a disappearance. Her forebodings were only such as all lovers have when the course of true love meets, or appears to meet, with an obstruction. She wondered if she had said or done anything to give offense. And when, after a mental review of her words and acts, she decided she had not, she was ready to pout her red lips and cry from sheer vexation.

She tried to fix her mind on the book she was pretending to read. Finding this impossible, she again turned to the window.

At this juncture a paper pellet sailed into the room, struck the ceiling and fell at her feet. She picked it up and untwisted it. It was a sheet of note-paper, and there was writing on it.

Before reading the words she ran to the window to see who had thrown it. No one was in sight. Then she spread the paper upon her lap, smoothed out the wrinkles and read:

"TO MISS DELL DEVORE:—"

"Your lover, Julian Pendergast, called on me yesterday. While here he was taken suddenly ill. He is a very sick man indeed; and, as he asks for you almost constantly, I thought it my duty to send you this note, and request you to visit him. Yours,

MADAME DUMAR."

A very startling communication, delivered in a very startling way.

She gave a quick cry, and the paper fell from her nerveless fingers. Her first impulse was to hurry at once to the residence of Madame Dumar. This was checked by the thought that the communication might be false. If true, why had it been delivered in so strange and surreptitious a manner?

At this, a great fear came over her. Her lover had said that the fortune-teller was certainly an ally of Taulbee's. Probably this note was designed to lead her into a trap.

But, on the other hand, the statement offered a complete explanation of the cause of Pendergast's failure to keep his appointment. He was not given to such lapses. If sick at Madame Dumar's residence, of course he could not come.

And he was calling for her in his flights of delirium.

That brought the argument to an abrupt close. She would go! No matter what the danger, she could not slight such a summons. He must be there! No one could pen so cruel a falsehood. She would be on the alert; and if a trap was intended she would use her good, sound sense to keep out of it. She had little fear that personal violence would be attempted; what she thought of was an effort to deprive her temporarily of liberty.

Having reached a decision she got ready, with much trembling and haste, to carry it out. As she was almost a stranger to the landlady, and quite so to the guests of the house, she did not think it best to confide to them the contents of the note or tell them where she was going.

In this she displayed the disposition that had led her to seek out Taulbee and lay the precious paper before him without first consulting an attorney as to the course to pursue.

A walk of fifteen or twenty minutes brought her in front of the fortune-teller's residence. She recognized it easily from the Tom-cat's description; and her heart beat painfully, as she approached the door.

The prophetess was evidently waiting for her; for the door was opened almost as soon as she announced her presence by rapping.

"Ah! Step in, please!" with a bending of the veiled head. And she led the way along the narrow hall; ushering the young lady into the darkened chamber.

Instantly the greenish glare shot out, giving to everything an unnatural and ghastly color.

Miss Devore looked about the apartment in an awed way, noting the owl and snake, and the black cat that purred and rubbed about the feet of its mistress. But nowhere did she see anything of her lover, Julian Pendergast.

"Where is the—the gentleman?" she stammered.

Madame Dumar wheeled around and stared at her as if in surprise.

"The gentleman? I don't know that I understand you, miss! Perhaps you mean my negro servant, whom I have dubbed the Tarantula of Tombstone."

Dell Devore was overwhelmed with astonishment.

"Why, you wrote to me, did you not, requesting me to come here? The note stated that Mr. Julian Pendergast, the attorney, was lying ill at this house, and that he wished to see me."

The prophetess gasped her amazement.

"There is some mistake!" she declared. "Let me see the note. I never wrote it."

Miss Devore passed it over for her inspection. It was difficult to read by that dazzling, green light, but Madame Dumar accomplished it finally.

"I never wrote it!" she asserted. "It's a base forgery. And that's what brought you here? I supposed, of course, you came to have your fortune told."

The young lady's distress was painfully apparent. She knew not what to do—what to think. Was this woman deceiving her? If she was, what motive inspired the deceit?

"I am at a loss to account for this imposition!" continued Madame Dumar. "Your—I mean Mr. Pendergast, was here the day before yesterday. I told his fortune for him. But he is not here now. I pledge you my word upon that. If you disbelieve me, you are at liberty to search the house."

Dell Devore declared that she had no wish to do that. And then woman-like gave way to a flood of hysterical weeping.

"Come! Come! This will never do!" urged the prophetess. "Dry your tears and let me tell your fortune. I will not charge you anything, considering the circumstances which brought you here. If your lover—for I perceive that he is your lover—is above ground I can trace him; and if he is under ground I can follow him there."

The young lady looked up, quickly, the tears shining in her eyes.

"You have a kind voice!" she said. "And, oh! I so want to know about him. But you can't tell me that way. Indeed you can't! I'll not believe it. It's silly and unreasonable!"

Madame Dumar only laughed at this bold expression.

"Let me tell your fortune, and then you can believe it or not, as you choose."

"But if you can tell that, why didn't you know what I came for, and that I had the letter, without questioning me?"

"Still a doubter! A hopeless one, I fear. Why, my dear child, I don't pretend to know at all times what's going on in the world. It's only when I place myself in proper condition, and the influences are right. Then I can tell what lies behind and before any particular person."

"Well, I won't believe it, no matter what you say!" with a laugh that was altogether forced, doubtful and hysterical. "I can't, you see. It's too preposterous. The future is known only to God!"

There was a solemnity about the last sentence that evidently struck disagreeably on the ears of the madame.

She shuddered a little, and drew the veil closer about her face.

"We'll not discuss that!" hastily. "You see, we couldn't agree, and discussion would be useless. Shall I read your hand, or will you take a look into the pool?"

Now that the test came, the young lady drew back, almost affrighted.

"Do you suppose it is wicked? It seems like mockery, or tempting fate. I hope you won't show me anything horrible, like you did the Tom-cat!"

"So you know about that? I suppose the cowboy will tell of it to every one he meets. Well, it will be a good advertisement. Do you wish to look into the pool?"

Dell Devore was about to refuse and leave the house. She really had no faith in the woman's pretended powers. But there is a mysterious fascination in even the pretense of looking into the future. She could not resist the spell.

"Come!" was the imperious command. "I can see that you prefer to look into the pool. I call it my magic looking-glass. And a magic glass it is, as you will be forced to confess!"

She grasped the hand of the shrinking girl, and drew her toward that baleful, leaping flame.

"There!" she cried, pointing with extended finger at the glassy surface. "Behold your fate!"

Miss Devore gave one quick glance, and reeled backward with a startled cry.

Beneath the placid waters she saw a picture that was terrible, and, if she had known it, significant. She saw herself, gaunt and hollow-cheeked, clasped in the arms of a starving and dying man. And that man was Julian Pendergast.

"Come away!" cried the stony-hearted fiend. "The picture is too much for you!"

She saw that the young woman was on the point of fainting.

But no relenting came to her. She dragged the almost helpless girl from that chamber of horrors into the little, cage-like structure to which Pendergast had been conducted.

"You are weak. That room is not quieting to unstrung nerves. This is better. Now, if you will remain here a moment, I will fetch you some water."

She bounded away; and, as she did so, the heavy door clanged to, and the cage began its downward movement.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

THE Tarantula of Tombstone went down under the Tom-cat's sudden assault. He had not anticipated such a screeching onset.

"Now, what air ye follerin' me fer?" demanded the Tom-cat, glaring fiercely into the black face that was upturned to the starlight. "I've a good mind to claw ye into ribbons. You'd make nice ones, I 'low, fer mournin' purposes."

He tightened his grip on the negro's throat, bringing a gurgling and wheezing sound from between the red lips and causing the long legs to twist convulsively.

"Oh! Oh! Foh goodness sake, boss, lef up a minit!" the negro howled, when the grasp was relaxed. "I didn't mean nuffin'; 'deed I didn't! I jes' wanted teh speak wid you."

"A likely yarn!" growled the Tom-cat, allow-

ing the Tarantula to rise to a sitting posture. "Don't begin by tellin' lies, er I'll plug ye, shore!"

The negro gave another howl, and repeated his protestations.

"Whar's Julian Pendergast?" with a significant movement of the revolver. "Spit it out lively!"

"Dat 'ar lawyer gemman what hab office on de main street? Sho', boss, I cyain't tell you dat! Ef you shoot me, I couldn't!"

"An' whar's Miss Dell Devore?"

"Hain't 'quainted wid no ladies 'roun' heah, 'cep'n Madame Dumah. You in'tainin' me wid foolishness, I see!"

The red lips expanded in an attempted laugh.

"It's my solemn belief that you put 'em both out o' the way; an' that you was follerin' me fer the same purpose. Ef I was jest positive on them p'int, I'd put a ball squar' through you."

The threat caused the negro to tremble violently, and hastily repeat his denials.

"Then, what wuz you follerin' me fer?"

"I wanted teh speak wid you, boss. Deh madame sent me. She say, 'Tell de Tom-cat dat ef he'll come to me I kin tell 'im whah his frien' is.' Dem's de berry words, sho'. An' so I been creepin' roun' an' creepin' roun' tryin' teh git to speak wid you on de subjec'."

The cowboy scarcely knew what to make of the statement.

"Why didn't you come up to me like a man an' say so? Yes: an' a minit ago you said you didn't know anything about Pendergast. How's that?"

But the negro was a slippery fellow.

"Hit's de troof! I do know nuffin' 'bout him; an' I do wan' teh know. De madame say yo' frien'. Mayby hit's some 'un else what she done speak about. She don't s'plain her intendments teh a nigger like me."

"An' so you slipped onto me because you didn't know who this hyer madame meant."

"No, boss! Don' bounce off'n de han'le dat way. I'se afear'd to walk aroun' dish yeh town. De boys flip stones an' holler at me, an' say: 'Smash de spideh!' So I creep roun' tryin' to speak wid you private."

There was an air of pleading in the negro's voice; and the Tom-cat, somewhat ashamed of his threats, lowered his revolver.

The negro gave evidence of his gratitude in an expansive grin.

"Now, you ac' lack a gemman. You skeered me powerful—'tic'lar' when you jump at me wid dat screechifyin'. Dat soun' lack a catymount what done los' hits cubs."

The Tom-cat gloried in his screeching abilities, and the comparison pleased him.

"I don't know ef I ought to let you go er not!" he said. "But I will; an' resk it. Ef you've been a-yarnin', though, I'll diskiver it, an' it'll be the wuss fer ye. Remember that. The next time, I'll claw as well as screech!"

"Thanky, boss! Thanky! An' don' fergit what I tol' you, ef you want'er heah from yo' frien'!"

The Tarantula evidently interpreted the cowboy's words as a release; for he backed behind a tree, and, with a sudden spring, disappeared in the gloom.

"Now, hyer's fer it!" the Tom-cat exclaimed.

"I'm a-goin' smack into that fortune-teller's house. Though, blamed ef I know what I'll do when I git thar. Ef she was on'y a man, I'd know mighty quick. But you've got to handle a female critter kind o' tender like er she'll faint. 'Twon't do to stick a pistol at her like I did the spider."

"I don't fancy the thing a bit. How should she know 'bout the young chap 'less she's had a hand in puttin' him out o' the way. Maby she'll try the same game on yours truly. Ef she does, she'll find she's got a buckin' broncho at the end of her rope."

He was uneasy; but the promise that he should gain information by paying the madame a visit drew him on.

He rather wished, as he left the town behind him and struck out toward the fortune-teller's residence, that he had forced the Tarantula to accompany him. By keeping the latter covered with a revolver he might have been able to dictate terms, or at least secure his own safety. There was no help for it now; and he tramped on, with eyes and ears strained to catch the first faint warning of peril.

He half-expected that he would be waylaid *en route*; but he reached the house without noting anything to excite his apprehension.

It was dark beneath the shadow of the building; and no friendly light gleamed from the windows. Not a sound to indicate that there was life behind the gloomy walls.

He drew and cocked a revolver; and, with the butt of it, rapped on the door. He rapped twice before a shuffling sound showed that the summons had been heard.

Then, the flame of a lamp pierced the darkness; and a little later the door was opened.

The fortune-teller stood before him, holding the light above her head and staring at him through her heavy veil.

"Evenin', ma'am!" he said, removing his cat-skin cap with his left hand, and holding the revolver down out of view with his right. "Yer nigger said as how you wanted to see me ag'in."

"Why, it's the Tom-cat! It's so dark I could hardly make you out. Certainly; come in. I sent the Tarantula after you a good while ago. I thought he had missed you, perhaps; or that you didn't intend to come."

"No; I don't keer to come in, ma'am! Thank-in' ye jest the same. You kin say it to me hyer. I've got a 'p'intment back to town that's powerful pressin'."

She laughed in his face.

"Why, Tom-cat, I didn't suppose you would ever be afraid of a woman!"

"No more I ain't!" protested the cowboy.

"Oh, but you are! Remember, I'm a fortune-teller, and I can read your thoughts as well as tell fortunes. You are afraid of me."

"Hanged ef I am!" cried the nettled cowboy, striding into the room. "I'll prove it. I ain't the kind that shows the white feather. Lead on to yer snake room. But remember that I'm watchin' ye. Ef ye kin tell other things, ye ought to know that I won't stand any nonsense."

She started toward the box-like room; then changed her mind and led the way to the apartment containing the pool. The cowboy noticed her hesitation. He could not understand it, but it made him more wary and watchful.

He had slipped the cocked revolver into his right coat pocket; but his hand still clasped it. His beloved cap he did not suffer to go out of his left hand.

"What's come o' Pendergast?" he demanded, not designing to notice the chair to which she waved him.

"He is in very great distress!" she answered. "Look into the pool."

"Blamed ef I do. I looked into it one't too often, a'ready. Couldn't sleep fer two nights after. Ef ye know anything say it. Ef ye don't I'm a-goin'."

The Tom-cat imagined he heard soft footsteps in an adjoining room, and it did not tend to make him tractable. His suspicions were constantly increasing. A premonition of danger settled upon him.

"Talk," he cried, "er I'll bolt. Ef ye know anything, say it. Where's Pendergast? That's what I come fer."

Again he heard those soft footsteps.

"Look into the pool," she urged. "It will tell you all."

Instead of obeying, he drew his revolver and backed through the doorway into the hall, which was also illuminated by that leaping green flame.

She hurried after him.

"Stop!" she commanded. "What do you mean? Put up that pistol. If you must leave in this silly way, leave by the proper entrance. You're backing right into my bed-chamber."

He was really doing nothing of the kind, but the statement had the desired effect. He recoiled, and for a moment lost his watchfulness.

"This way," she said. "If you will go, go out at the side entrance. I haven't any patience with you. I sent for you with the best of motives. I intended to truly reveal to you the present whereabouts of Mr. Pendergast, and also of his sweetheart, Dell Devore. But your foolish suspicions have robbed you of your wits, and you won't listen to anything. Here, go out this way!"

And she flung open the door leading into the cage; but the Tom-cat remembered that she had started toward that on his entrance, and the act deepened his distrust.

"Not by a jugful!" he yelled. "I go out the way I come in!" And he backed toward what he believed to be the front entrance.

Madame Dumar gave a hysterical scream, and pointed toward the room they had just vacated. The Tom-cat's eyes involuntarily followed hers. He saw nothing. But the next instant he heard the swish of a rope, and a noose dropped over his shoulders, pinioning his arms to his sides.

Then he was jerked from his feet, his revolver went spinning across the hallway, and he found himself engaged in a deadly struggle with the Tombstone Tarantula. At the same time the door of the room closed, shutting out the green

light, and plunging everything into the deepest gloom.

"Whoop!" he yelled, roused to tremendous exertions. "Tom-cat ag'in! Trant'ly! I'll smash ye, ye black spider. Mee-ee-ow-ow!"

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE SITUATION.

DELL DEVORE became almost wild with terror as the cage descended into the darkness, bearing her with it.

She had not dreamed of treachery, when Madame Dumar hurried away, saying that she was going for water. Even now she could scarcely realize what had happened.

After a descent of perhaps a hundred feet, the cage stopped, with a jolt, and the door swung outward, apparently of its own accord.

But she could see nothing. The air seemed freer and purer, however. While she was still filled with wonder and fear, she heard a quick step and some one rushed toward her, crying:

"Oh, my own darling Dell! You here in this horrible place? Stay there! I am coming!"

But the warning came too late. With a quick spring she had leaped from the cage, attracted by his voice.

Then the door closed and the elevator began to ascend.

He sprang at it, as if he would hold it by main force. But it hurled him against a rocky projection; and he fell, half-fainting, at Dell's feet.

All this was very mysterious and strange; and she bent above him, thinking that surely she must be dreaming. She would awaken soon to find the sun shining and the birds singing in the old, familiar way.

But he aroused almost immediately and spoke to her, and she knew it was not a dream.

"Oh, if I had only been here when the cage descended!" he moaned. "They might have drawn us up ignorantly, and then I would have fought a way to daylight. But it's too late! Too late! It will not descend again—unless they entrap the Tom-cat. I didn't dream of its coming down this time."

"Oh, my darling! That you should be consigned to such a fate!"

He drew her to him, shuddering as he did so.

She tried to say something that would comfort him, but found her own grief so great that she could not.

"It seems ages since I descended into this living tomb!" he continued, his calmness returning somewhat. "You know what it is, I suppose! It is a deserted mine. That car was doubtless used once for drawing up ore. It has been transformed into an elevator-like room, and arranged in some way to work as it now does."

"I have explored the mine as far as I dare go. It is nothing but a series of galleries, leading no one can tell where. I thought at first there must be an opening that could be easily found, for you notice the air seems rather fresh. But I can't discover anything of the kind. I am almost convinced there isn't any, or they wouldn't have placed us here."

He spoke in the weary, desponding tone of a man who has lost hope.

"But the car!" she exclaimed, clinging to him as if she feared he might melt away into the darkness.

"There is a chance—if it descends with the Tom-cat. A slender one; but still a chance. We might crowd into it, and thus be drawn to the room above. I have thought it over; but the hope is so slight that I fear we must discard it. Though in a frenzy a while ago, I leaped at it, as a drowning man might leap at a straw."

"You see, the trouble is, they control the machinery that raises and lowers the cage. If we should enter it, they might not raise it. In fact, would not; for I am sure they can hear every movement that is made within it."

Then he told her how he had been entrapped; and she related her own experience.

"And I have only been down here forty-eight hours!" he said, when she had told him the day of the week and the time of day. "It doesn't seem possible. How the hours have dragged! And I have been busy, too, searching for an outlet. But there is none. A series of never-ending galleries. I feared to go too far lest I might not be able to find my way back. It would be terrible, with both of us in here and lost from each other."

He clasped her hand; and she was startled to find how thin his fingers were.

"Mental torture exhausts more rapidly than hunger and thirst!" he declared, answering her startled questions. "And I am suffering from all three, now. It has been fifty hours since I

tasted food or drink; and I have suffered a lifetime of agony."

"But do not weep. If it is God's will that we die here, let us be thankful that we can die together."

She had not yet reached that state of resignation; and her lamentations were heart-rending.

He endeavored to comfort her; but his honesty would not permit him to hold out false hopes.

"If they do not trap the Tom-cat as they did us, we may escape!" he said. "He is an honest and faithful fellow, and will not quickly give up the search. If he knew we were here, I would have little fear. He would rescue us, if he had to organize a band and raze the house to its foundations. But he does not know we are here; and I do not see how he is to discover the fact, unless he is sent down in the car as we were."

It was hard for Dell to give up all hope of ever again seeing the bright sunlight, which was at that moment, she knew, flooding the streets of Tombstone. To be dragged from the warmth and color of the beautiful world above, and be consigned to a torturing, lingering death in the gloomy galleries of that deserted mine.

The picture she had seen in the pool projected itself into the future and became a haunting horror. Her mind groped forward, counting the minutes, the hours, the days—until the end. Then she prayed that it might come speedily, if it must come.

She knew now that the pretended fortune-teller was some base creature, the tool of Silas Taulbee. It could not be otherwise, for Taulbee was the only person who could wish her out of the way. And Pendergast must suffer because he had championed her cause!

At last she started to her feet.

Pendergast was sitting by her, his head drooped on his breast, his every attitude denoting the deepest dejection. She had become accustomed to the darkness, and could now make out his appearance, as he sat there.

"Light and air get into this mine in some way!" she exclaimed, her energies becoming aroused. "There must be an entrance somewhere besides the shaft. We can feel that the air is comparatively fresh, and there must be light, or we could not see at all. I can make out the shape of my hands. If no light entered, we could see nothing, no matter how long we remained in the dark."

Pendergast lifted his head, but did not speak.

"I can't stand it to remain here, Julian, without making an effort to escape! We are bound to perish here."

"What would you do?" he asked.

"Anything! So that it seems we are doing something. Explore the galleries! One at a time. There must be a way out."

"I have explored them!" he declared. "If we go too far we cannot return to the shaft."

Weakness had sapped his courage. When first he found himself in the mine he had likewise been all fire and energy.

"What matters it if we cannot find our way back here?" she argued. "We cannot escape by this shaft. We might as well die in one place as another. But I feel sure that some good-fortune will guide us."

Her hopeful words inspired in him something of her spirit.

"I'm willing to try!" he announced, staggering to his feet.

With joy she hailed the declaration. It was like a new lease of life. As he stood tremblingly by her she began to realize how weak he was, and slipped a hand through his arm in an encouraging way.

"Now what direction?" she asked.

"I tried those galleries leading straight away," was the reply. "They branched until I had to give it up."

"One is as good as another, I suppose," drawing him forward. "Let us try this. And pray Heaven that it may lead us out of this terrible place!"

With a sincere heart he echoed her words; and together they set forward.

It was a seemingly interminable walk. They went from one branching gallery into another; on, until they lost all idea of time, distance and location. For all they knew to the contrary they might be traversing the same galleries over and over again.

At last Dell sunk down with a moan of despair; and Pendergast crouched disconsolately by her side.

Hunger and thirst were gnawing, wolf-like, at his vitals. Such terrible cravings he had never known. His mouth and throat were parched and blistered, and his lips cracked and bleeding. Worst of all, touches of delirium came at times.

And when he slept, in a restless, tossing way, his dreams were filled with feastings and he seemed laying his parched body in cooling lakes of crystal clearness.

Then he would awake to the terrible hunger, thirst and darkness.

Dell Devore did not suffer so much in that way. He had been in there two days and nights before she came. But her mental torture and her weariness were crushing.

When she sunk down she almost believed she was dying. She crept nearer to Pendergast, placed her hands in his, and strained her eyes to see his features. But the darkness was too great. Then, she kissed him again and again, passionately.

"Dell!" he said, aroused by her kisses, "I believe my time has come. I can't last a great deal longer. If you were not with me I would be tempted to hurry matters by the suicide's route. But, you have saved me from that. Put your arms about me; and if we must die, let us die together. And may the Lord look down in mercy on our souls."

She complied with the request, trembling and weeping; and, as she did so, waited to Heaven a prayer as sincere and earnest as ever came from the heart of mortal.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISE.

WHO shall say that her prayer was not answered.

A shuffling sound came out of the gloom, and a big, brown bear poked his nose around an angle of the gallery. Dimly-defined he seemed of monstrous size; and his eyes gleamed balefully.

Dell gave an involuntary shriek, causing Pendergast to lift his head, in a questioning way. Whereat the bear growled horribly.

This drew another shriek from her, and Pendergast, catching sight of the bear fired at it, scarcely realizing what he was doing.

The bear growled again, and made off. "Follow him!" cried Pendergast, now fully aroused. "That was a foolish shot. He may save us!"

He leaped to his feet, strengthened by this new hope; and hurried after the bear, fairly dragging Dell along with him.

"Hurry!" he urged. "We must not let him get away. He came in here; and we'll go out, if we follow him. We can crawl through any aperture that he can. Oh, Dell! We're saved! saved!"

He was almost wild with the thought.

As for Dell she was scarcely less excited, now that she realized what the appearance of the bear meant for them. And she hastened along at her lover's side, hardly daring to speak. She had suddenly lost all fear of the brute. Under ordinary circumstances she would have fled from a bear with horror. Now she was filled with apprehension lest the creature might distance them and leave them again alone.

The bear shuffled along, growling in a menacing way, when they pressed him closely. Sometimes he would bolt around an angle or into a new passage, and they would be compelled to stop to determine the way he had gone. Then they would run, knowing that life depended on their speed, until they came up with him once more.

It was by a long and devious route that he led them. But, they scarcely realized it. So excited were they, and so strengthened by hope, they forgot the flight of time and gave no heed to pain and weariness.

And then, like the glimmer of a far-off star, they saw a point of white light.

"Saved! Saved! Oh, Dell, we are saved!" Pendergast shouted, hysterically. And Dell Devore felt the tears dropping from her own cheeks, while a prayer of gratitude welled up in her heart.

Ay! they were saved. That ungainly brown bear had led them back to life and happiness.

The point of light grew brighter and larger. Soon they could make out quite plainly the shaggy form of their brute guide. Then they could discern the features of each other.

Pendergast was wild with delight. His hollow cheeks were glowing with joy, and his suffused eyes shone gratefully. He kept up an incessant chatter. But Dell's happiness was too deep for words.

Suddenly the light was blotted out.

"The bear is crawling through the entrance!" shouted Pendergast. "Hooray! Now for liberty!"

He dashed forward, almost dragging his sweetheart from her feet.

The light came again; the bear was gone; and

they were crawling through the narrow aperture. It was a tunnel-like place, hollowed out by some wild animal. Perhaps by the bear.

In another instant they were beneath the deep-blue vault of heaven, now radiant with the glory of the rising sun. Then Pendergast's strength deserted him, and he reeled and fell fainting.

The country about was strange to Dell. She had never been there before. As far as she could judge by appearances they might be hundreds of miles from the town of Tombstone.

But she had no time to waste in conjecture. Her lover demanded her immediate attention. There was no water near; and she was quite at a loss what to do. Nevertheless she knelt by him and began to chafe his wrists and hands.

The fainting fit was fortunately of short duration. He revived, and sat up—staring at her in a strange way out of his deeply-sunken eyes.

He was emaciated and feverish; his eyes blue-lidded, with dark circles beneath them; and his whole appearance indicative of the greatest mental and physical exhaustion.

"Is it you, Dell?" as his eyes took on a look of recognition and memory. "Yes! Thank God, we are saved! Saved!"

Then, as he tried to stagger to his feet:

"Oh, if I only had some water!"

She was thinking the same. Not only water for her lover, but for herself. She began to realize how very, very thirsty she was.

"Why, how long were we in there together?" she questioned, with an air of mystification.

"When I called on Madame Dumar it was almost noon! And now the sun is rising! A night has passed! It appears impossible!"

"It seems to me it has been a month!" he declared, steadying himself on his feet with her assistance. "I felt strong as an ox while chasing that bear. Now I'm as weak as a child."

"It was the strength of excitement," she answered. "You are hardly able to stand. Rest against that boulder, while I go in search of water. There must be some near. A creek, spring, or something. I'll have to use your hat as a pail."

She tried to smile in a cheery way; and taking the hat, hastened off in search of the life-giving fluid.

She glanced about to see if the bear was in the vicinity.

"It wouldn't be nice to have the beast guide me to safety, just to make a meal off of me!" and she shuddered.

But the bear had disappeared.

The search was a long one, for the country thereabout was dry and rocky. But at last she found a tiny pool, formed by water oozing through a clayey soil. It was quite cool; as the sun had not yet searched it out with his hot rays.

Filling the hat half-full she hurried back to where she had left Pendergast sitting against the boulder. Not, however, before she had satisfied her own cravings.

How the eyes of the fever-parched man shone when they fell upon that dripping hat. Snatching it from her he buried his face in the water and drank greedily, scarcely stopping to breathe.

"You must be careful, Julian!" she urged, drawing the hat away. "I, as your physician, command you to moderation. That is enough, now. After a little you can drink more."

The water brought strength and life to him. To her surprise he soon got upon his feet without assistance.

"Now, if we had something to eat!" he said, glaring about through the shrubbery. "I feel like a new man, even as it is. That water has done me a world of good. Where do you suppose we are?"

"I was just thinking of that! The country is unfamiliar. I think, though, the town cannot be far. Across that ridge, probably."

"Yes," reflectively, "it must be. We have crossed the ridge by going under it. How we are to get into town puzzles me. There don't appear to be any trails hereabouts."

"We can't!" she replied. "Not until we are both stronger!"

"Which we're not liable to be, unless we can find something to eat."

The words gave her an idea. Without saying anything to raise hopes that might be blasted, she tripped away. Within half an hour she returned with a quantity of berries, which she had found on some low-growing bushes.

Together they devoured them; Julian eating with the greediness of a half-starved man.

When they were finished, he felt so much better that he accompanied her on a short walk to

see if he could not bring down something more substantial with his revolver.

He succeeded in shooting a couple of mountain quails. He had matches in a metallic case; and while Dell prepared the quails, he kindled a fire. No meat ever tasted better than the flesh of those quails, broiled over a bed of hot coals on the ends of sharpened sticks.

Then they climbed toward the top of the ridge, hoping to see Tombstone just beyond it. Pendergast's strength was not equal to the task, however. The increasing heat of the sun affected his head; and they had to halt and remain in a clump of bushes until near sunset.

As the air became cooler they pushed on again, with slow and weary feet; and, just as darkness settled down, they reached the low summit and looked off on the twinkling lights of the town.

The sight inspired them with renewed courage, and they went on, halting occasionally, and by nine o'clock were in the streets of Tombstone.

Hailing a passing vehicle, they were conveyed to Pendergast's boarding-house; and from that Dell was driven to her own.

As soon as Pendergast had done full justice to the supper placed before him he asked that the Texas Tom-cat might be sent to him.

"He is not in town!" was the startling information that was brought, after almost an hour's anxious waiting.

"Not in town?"

"So it seems, sir!" declared the messenger.

"He called for you here, I'm told, sometime this evening. Finding that you were gone, he went away; and not long ago he was seen walking toward the northern trail. I've been to his lodgings, and all over town, and I can't find him."

Pendergast had not told what had befallen himself and his sweetheart. He had evaded questions, believing the time not ripe for explanations. Now he saw that he must unbosom himself. He was satisfied the Town-cat had been induced to visit the fortune-teller's residence. Probably the faithful fellow was now in the depths of the mine—or dead!

Urged by this thought he told the messenger how he had been entrapped, together with his sweetheart; how they had escaped; and of the peril he believed the Tom-cat to be in.

"And you want men?" questioned the messenger.

"Yes! A half-dozen reliable fellows! And warrants for the arrest of the fortune-teller and her servant."

His strength and vigor were rapidly returning; this new excitement also lent strength and spurred him on; and while the messenger was gathering the men he went into town and procured warrants for the arrest of Madame Dumar and the Tombstone Tarantula.

CHAPTER IX.

TO THE RESCUE.

HE had scarcely done so, when the man appeared, with four or five rough-looking miners at his heels.

Pendergast explained to them the situation, offered to pay them liberally for their services, and then led the way out of town.

"Remember there's to be no shooting, unless it becomes absolutely necessary, to save life!" he explained, as they neared the house.

He was about to say more, when a series of screeches came to their ears.

"That's the Tom-cat!" he cried, drawing his weapons and darting forward, entirely forgetful of his weakened condition.

His followers imitated him. A few bounds brought them to the heavy door. One of the miners hurled his burly frame unceremoniously against it. It flew open, and they tumbled into the dark hallway.

Pandemonium seemed let loose there in the darkness. The screeches of the Tom-cat were answered by the labored breathing of the Tarantula, as he sought to gain the better of his nimble foe.

The rescuing party could do nothing in the gloom. Pendergast shouted his encouragement to the cowboy and raked a match on the wall. At the same instant the door at the opposite end opened, flooding the hall with that blinding, green flame, and the prophetess leaped to the negro's assistance.

A quick blow, and then she half-dragged the Tarantula into the elevator. The door closed with a vicious snap. And before Pendergast and his men realized what had occurred, the fortune-teller and her servant were speeding down the shaft.

"Stop the thing!" yelled Pendergast, at the

same time hurrying to the prostrate cowboy, who lay as if dead.

The prophetess had struck with some blunt instrument, and the blow, falling upon the Tom-cat's head had rendered him senseless.

While Pendergast was determining this, the men were searching for some means by which they could stop the descending elevator. They finally discovered the lever that controlled it; but, before they did so, the cage reached the bottom of the shaft and its occupants escaped into the mine.

Pendergast was attempting the cowboy's restoration. The wound was in the nature of a contusion. He bathed it in cold water and bound it up with his own handkerchief. The water seemed to possess revivifying power. The cowboy stirred uneasily, and opened his eyes. Then he felt of his bruised head, and sat up.

"Great guv'ner!" he cried, staring into Pendergast's face. "So 'twas you that bu'sted through the door an' told me to look chipper, an' plug 'im? A p'izen T'rantly got away with a Tom-cat. Well, I never!"

Pendergast did not stay to answer questions. He hurried off to examine the peculiar machinery by which the elevator was controlled. It was an ingenious arrangement, working on the principle of the balance. When the cage descended, the weights were drawn up, and *vice versa*. The additional weight of a person or persons in the cage would cause it to descend. But to draw it up, loaded, a winch was necessary.

It was empty now, and it came up quite readily.

"Tumble in there, some of you!" commanded Pendergast. "Not all! Some must stay here to draw us up again. I'm going after that precious pair. They can't have got far from the bottom of the shaft. And they won't dare to go far for fear of getting lost."

He turned, to see the Tom-cat at his elbow, the well-worn catskin cap pressed down on the bandaged head.

"So, they went down thar?" cried the cowboy. "An' that's where *she* wanted to send me."

"And would have done so, if we hadn't come just in time. Tumble in! I'll be glad to have you go 'long, if you feel able."

"Oh, I'm all right!" with a tug at the cap to make sure that it was in place. "Tom-cats ag'in' Tarant'ly! I'm with ye. I want to git even with that chap fer the love-lick he give me. That was a sneakin' trick."

Pendergast shouted a command and the cage dropped into the depths with startling swiftness.

Like tumblin' down a well, that air!" exclaimed the irrepressible cowboy, as the cage brought up at the bottom, with something of a crash. "Don't know's I hanker much after that style o' travelin'."

He leaped out as soon as the door was open, only to find himself in a darkness as dense as the traditional gloom of Egypt.

"There! I forgot a light!" cried Pendergast. "A most inexcusable blunder!"

"Hyer's one!" said one of the men, producing and lighting a miner's lantern.

The Tom-cat led the search, for it was not his nature to remain in the rear when there was excitement and danger. But they could discover nothing. The woman and the negro had disappeared completely.

Pendergast was somewhat disappointed as they gathered again about the shaft.

Yet, when everything is taken into consideration, he had no good reason for being so. Placed in similar circumstances, he would have fled into the gloomy galleries, as the fugitives had probably done.

They re-entered the cage, and were drawn up. It was now past midnight. Pendergast was becoming faint and weak. He would not leave, however, until the house had been subjected to a rigid search. He hoped to find something to implicate Taulbee.

In this he was disappointed. The "mysterious" room held nothing that was really mysterious. The green flame was produced by the ignition of some peculiar preparation. In the miraculous pool was a hand-painted picture, showing "Tom-cat's Triad" in the last stages of starvation. It was rather artistically done, and served to show that the pretended prophetess was something of an artist.

"But how'd she git that fu'st pictur'?" asked the Tom-cat, staring in great amazement at the one before him. "She c'u'd paint this 'cause she'd seen us all. But when she showed the fu'st 'un, she'd never see'd me, I'm confident."

"That's something you *can't* be confident of," asserted Pendergast. "You've never seen this woman's face, remember. If you should, you might recognize her instantly."

On the way back to town, he related to the Tom-cat the adventures of himself and Miss Dell Devore, to the cowboy's great astonishment.

"There's one thing we can do," he announced, before dismissing and paying his followers. "We've left two men at the house. There's also an opening just across the divide. In the morning I want to post two men there. The fugitives will try to escape at one of those places. They will never remain in that hole and starve—unless they get bewildered and lost!"

He was really too tired to explain further, and, as soon as they were gone, he bade the Tom-cat good-night, and sought his boarding-house.

The next day he piloted the two men to the place where he and Dell had escaped from the mine, and gave instructions that one or the other was to remain on guard all the time. It was possible that the fortune-teller and her negro servant had already escaped by that exit. But he did not think it at all probable. It was very unlikely that they knew of it, and there was little chance of the bear appearing to them as he had done to the despairing lovers.

The Tom-cat returned to his work in the Phoenix Mine, and affairs resumed their normal condition.

The watchers at the house, and those at the hole emerging on the slope, were alert and vigilant. But the days passed, and their eager eyes remained unrewarded by a glimpse of the Tarantula or of his veiled mistress.

CHAPTER X.

MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS.

WHEN a week had passed without development of any sort, Pendergast dismissed the watchers. He, however, requested the Tom-cat to occupy one of the rooms of the house as a sleeping apartment; and this the cowboy did.

"I am satisfied," he said, explaining his motives to the Tom-cat, "that they will never find the exit on the slope. It may be that there is another way of egress. And it's barely possible that they are still in the mine, and alive. You see, they may have been prepared for something of the kind. If so, they will stay there until the excitement dies away, or, until their food and water is exhausted, and then they will try to come out. In any event, if they escape or have escaped, it is quite likely they will visit the house. There are articles of value and clothing there; and they will not wish to abandon them. If they make such a visit they are almost sure to go there at night, to avoid observation."

"You can be ready for them; and by dint of a surprise I think you can capture them."

The cowboy expressed an eager desire to try it at any rate.

"I want to git a whack at that T'rantly. I wouldn't ax nothin' better'n fer him to come nosin' around thar in the dark!"

"And there's another thing!" Pendergast continued. "The house belongs to Silas Taulbee! I discovered that by searching the records. It may be that the old mine connects in some way with the new one. Any way it makes it certain that Taulbee knew all about those people and that they were working in his interest. If you can find an opportunity while down in the Phoenix Mine, investigate the matter a little; and learn, if possible, if there is a chamber connecting the two mines."

"And above all do not let Taulbee know you are to sleep in the house. He may order you out of it; or the warning he would thus receive might make your watching of no avail. The house is in an isolated position and that is in favor of secrecy; you will have no trouble about keeping the knowledge of your movements to yourself."

The first night the Tom-cat remained there, he searched the house thoroughly. He was rewarded by no new discoveries. The elevator cage was at the bottom of the shaft. Pendergast had instructed the watchers to leave it there, in the hope that the fugitives might ascend by it.

The Tom-cat did not alter its position. They might come up by it, yet. For his sleeping apartment he chose a little room, across the hall, almost opposite the elevator. The door of this he left slightly ajar; so that the faintest sound would reach and arouse him.

Two or three nights passed in a very quiet way. He left the house always before dawn

and returned to it after dark. Nothing occurred to reward his vigilance.

But one night he was awakened by, he scarcely knew what. It was well on toward morning. For some time he lay still, listening. He could hear the wind whistling outside as it chafed against the eaves and angles of the house. Then, after a time, in the lulls of the wind, the noise of light footsteps.

He got up quietly—he had only removed his cap and boots on retiring—and stepped softly to the door, his weapons in readiness. The sounds came from the chamber at the further end of the hall. Some one was moving about in there.

Then he noticed that the elevator cage had been raised. The sound of that was what had awakened him, probably.

The steps were very light. Yet the intruder moved about briskly enough, as if he had no fear of a surprise.

The Tom-cat's first impulse was to give his war-cry and rush upon the person, depending upon the surprise to aid in the capture. Then the open cage gave him another and better idea. It was plain that the intruder had ascended by it; and, no doubt, he would retire in the same way. Why not follow, or rather accompany him? It might result in valuable revelations.

To think was to act, with the Tom-cat. He slipped his beloved cap over his ears, and in his stockinged feet, crept softly into the elevator. The drapery at its corners was almost invaluable now. Within its folds he secreted himself, and quietly awaited the return of the prowler.

He believed that the individual was Tarantula. But he could not be sure of it, for the whole house was plunged in the deepest gloom. He drew his conclusion from the peculiar sounds made by the footsteps. They were soft, but accompanied by a jar, showing the person to be of a heavy frame. The footsteps of the woman would have sounded very differently.

"Well, hyer's a go!" he soliloquized, as he crouched in eager expectancy. "Never had a idee that I'd want to cage myself up with that air spider! But I'm in fer it. Ef he noses me out, thar'll be a lively scrimmage, 'tany rate. I'd like to meet 'im on squar', fa'r fightin'-groun', and I don't know but this 'u'd fill the bill. Thar's room enough in hyer, an' not any too much, an' no one could jump in an' spile the fun."

"Don't know as I'd keer ef he did diskiver me ef't wasn't fer doin' the shadder trick!"

"I 'low, now, he's got a den down thar some-eres, an' prob'ly the fortune-teller's down thar. Wouldn't it be a picnic ef I could s'prise an' rope 'em both, after findin' out their secrets?"

"I s'pose he's getherin' up a lot o' vittles; fer I thought I heard some dishes clatter. It a'most makes me narvous, waitin' hyer fer him this-a-way!"

He had not much longer to wait. The footsteps were even then approaching the elevator.

The Tom-cat almost held his breath, so great was his anxiety. The footsteps came on; then the gloom intensified, and he knew that the prowler was standing in the doorway of the cage.

For a little while the man seemed searching for something.

"Gr-reat Joshway!" gasped the Tom-cat, nerving himself. "I do b'lieve he's a-goin' to strike a light!"

But the man was only feeling for the lever that controlled the elevator. Then the door closed, and the cage began to descend.

It was a decidedly novel and thrilling experience for the cowboy. Within arm's-length of a deadly enemy whose identity was only suspected, and descending with him into the bowels of the earth.

The cage descended with a rapidity that was evidently startling to the man; and he felt about in the corners for the chain cable. With this he checked the descent—a thing Pendergast had not been able to do through ignorance of knowing how.

As the man was feeling among the drapery, the Tom-cat stood in instant expectation of discovery. The sweat started from every pore; he set his teeth firmly, and braced himself for the conflict that must follow. His hands opened and closed with convulsive energy, and that wild and startling "meow" formed on his lips.

The fellow muttered something, as the speed of the cage lessened. What it was the Tom-cat could not make out. But whatever the man's ideas as to the cause of the quick descent, he never suspected that there was another person in the cage.

As soon as it touched the bottom of the shaft, the door was pushed open and the man stepped out into the gloom. Instantly the Tom-cat followed, with senses alert and foot-falls as light

as the descent of autumn leaves. He fully realized the double peril in so doing. He might walk into a trap; or, escaping that, might never be able to retrace his way to the shaft.

"Go it, ye crawlin', creepin' spider!" he muttered, as he slipped forward. "The Tom-cat's after ye, green-eyed and hot-footed. Ef ye git away from him now, ye'll have to fly."

All the time, while listening to the retreating footsteps, he was mentally estimating the distance and direction traversed. He noted every angle, and even counted the number of steps which he took.

All at once the fellow stopped and ignited a match. As he did so, the cowboy shrunk against the wall. The feeble flame showed that the Tom-cat was right in his conjectures. The prowler was the Tombstone Tarantula.

Then the Tom-cat saw that the negro had a bunch of papers in one hand, and it was quickly evident why he had struck the match. He glanced hurriedly through the papers; then, as the match seemed on the point of expiring, he applied it to them, and with a sort of gloating joy, saw them consumed.

All but one. That fluttered to the ground unnoticed by him. The Tom-cat saw it, however, and made up his mind to possess it as soon as the Tarantula moved on.

Then the flames died out, making the darkness ten-fold more intense than before, if that were possible.

Again the Tarantula retreated, and the Tom-cat followed. He had marked the spot where the paper fell, and found it without much trouble. But he lost some time, and hurried quickly on, lest he should lose the guiding footsteps, which were very faint.

Before he had regained the distance lost, a door opened, apparently in the solid wall. There appeared to be a lighted room beyond it, for the light streamed through into the darkness of the mine. Then the door closed, and the Tarantula had vanished.

For a moment the cowboy was staggered by this unexpected revelation.

"Jest fer all the worl' like a man goin' home," he declared. "The door opens, the light pours out; then it's dark, and he's gone! That throws my calculations flatter'n a roped steer. An' I s'pose the fortune-teller's abind that wall, too."

He hurried up to it, felt it over carefully, and even ventured to sound it timidly; but he discovered nothing. There was no sign of an opening. Nothing, apparently, but the rugged rock, just as it had been left by the blasts and the miners' picks.

"Beats me! What'll Pendergast say when I tell 'im that? He'll think I drempt it! But, no, he can't, fer hyer's the paper. Now, I wonder what's in it. I'd give a small forchin to 'a' got them that the spider burnt."

He searched his pockets for a match, but he could find none, and, after studying the situation a little while, he began to retrace his way, slowly and carefully, counting his steps.

When he had turned the requisite number of angles and counted out the steps, he began a search for the door of the cage. After much fumbling along the walls, he found it, and proceeded to draw up the cage by pulling downward on the iron cable that passed through it.

Then he sent it down again, so that the Tarantula would have no cause for suspicion, should he return.

He could scarcely wait to gain his room and light a candle, so great was his anxiety to know what was contained in the paper which the negro had inadvertently dropped.

When he had lighted the candle and deciphered the writing, his features assumed a look of the most intense astonishment. The bit of paper was a letter written in an Eastern city, and introducing Miss Dell Devore to Silas Taulbee, of Tombstone.

"An' them that the spider burnt was the very writin's that she put into Taulbee's han's when she fu'st come hyer!" exclaimed the Tom-cat, greatly excited.

CHAPTER XI.

A TICKLED TOM-CAT.

His astonishment gave way to gratification.

"Yes; an' that nails this hyer bizness right squar' down onto Taulbee. What's this paper doin' in this hyer house ef he ain't in cahoots with the fortune-teller an' the spider? Plainer'n print, that is!

"An' so the young feller was right. A sort of fight o' three ag'in' three. Ef we're a triad, I reckon they're another'n. Triads ag'in' Triads! Tom-cats ag'in' Tarant'lyls!"

The recollection of his combat with the latter drew a cat-like growl from his lips.

"I must see Pendergast 'bout this! No work fer the undersigned to-day. I'll tell old Taulbee will he please excuse me on account o' p'ticklar an' pressin' bizness. An' ef that won't be the truth then I'm a liar. This hyer's bizness that jest can't wait!"

There was a faint glow in the East, indicative of approaching day. He slipped the precious letter into one of his pockets, drew on his boots, and left the house. In the course of a half-hour he was closeted with Pendergast, in the latter's room.

"What d'ye think o' that?" demanded the Tom-cat, handing over the letter, with a grin.

"Why, where did you get it?" Pendergast asked, as he glanced down the lines.

"That's what I came to tell you 'bout!"

And with a prefacing series of chuckles, the Tom-cat plunged into his story.

Naturally it surprised Pendergast quite as much as the discoveries had surprised the narrator.

"Beats all, don't it?" the cowboy questioned, in conclusion. "I was never done up in my life as I was when that hole opened and the fire-light, er whatever it was, flashed out into the mine."

"Rather singular!" the young man confessed.

"And the letter proves that I was right in my surmises. Taulbee believed we had ceased our watch; and sent the negro to destroy the papers. They were there at the time of our raid, and the suddenness with which we came gave them no time to carry them off. Doubtless the negro took them into the mine before burning them, for fear that the light might betray him, if he destroyed them in the house."

"What I can't understand, though, is, why he placed them in the fortune teller's possession. It would have been more reasonable for him to have destroyed them in the first place, or kept them himself."

"The rope's got too many kinks in it fer me to unravel!" declared the Tom-cat. "I move 'at we take a wheen o' fellers, go back to the ole mine an' bu'st down the door which the Trant'ly went through. That'll show the hull thing up at onc't. We kin nab the spider, an' the woman, too, ef she's thar, an' make 'em own up to the devilment they're into. We kin git a cinch onto ole Taulbee that-a-way that will make 'im squirm."

The cowboy's eyes shone with enthusiasm.

"Do you know, I believe that secret door opens into the basement of Taulbee's residence?" said Pendergast, thoughtfully. "I've been studying the directions you took in following that darky, and the number of steps you went. I really believe it would bring one right under Taulbee's house."

"So much the better!" cried the Tom-cat. "Ef we kin round 'em up in Taulbee's own house, that'll be jest the very identical thing. Ye see, we've got warrants fer their arrest; an' we kin take 'em wharever we kin find 'em. Ef the Trant'ly leads us to Taulbee's house, we'll go in. An' ef he's in thar, we'll drag him out before these other men. Then when he confesses to his devilment, it will make the thing so strong—tie Taulbee up so, ye know—that he jest can't wriggle."

The Tom-cat, in imagination, could even then see the deed accomplished.

"Perhaps it will work!" said Pendergast. "I want to think it over a little. Come to my office in about an hour. In the mean time look up your men, get a good breakfast, and send word to Taulbee that you'll not be able to work to-day."

"Tell him I'm feverish?" queried the cowboy, taking up his cap.

"It wouldn't be any lie!" was the laughing response. "Your eyes are shining like stars."

When the Tom-cat was gone, Pendergast got ready for the proposed undertaking. Then, after breakfast, he sent a message to Dell Devore, and sauntered down the street to his office.

The business of the day had commenced. The stores and saloons were open; and the streets were filled with loungers, and with workmen hurrying to their work. It was a busy scene, and typical of the hurrying, bustling, driving life of the mining-towns.

It was too early to expect clients; and, after sweeping and dusting the little office—he employed no office-boy—he set down to await the coming of Miss Devore, for whom he had sent.

She came in a short time, excited and expectant, not knowing what to make of this early and peremptory summons.

At the same time, the cowboy appeared, his

cap tucked under his arm, and his face flushing, as he saw the young lady.

"Sit down, Tom-cat, while I tell Miss Devore of your discoveries," said Pendergast.

"One of the very papers I gave Taulbee!" she cried, beaming upon the cowboy, after reading the letter and hearing the explanations. "Tom-cat, you are invaluable! This is almost too good for belief!"

"Don't, miss," he protested, twisting uneasily. He feared she was about to cover him with a profusion of thanks. "It's nothin'. I'd 'a' done the same fer any other pore creeter. I mean lady! Pardon me fer the mistake."

"We are all poor creatures!" Pendergast declared, coming to his assistance.

"Yes; 'I low we air!" taking the cap from under his arm, and endeavoring to fan himself with it. "My! but this air room's hot. It's 'cause it's so little, I s'pose. I don't see how any man kin stand it to be shet up in a house all the time. 'Twould naterally roast me. I'd rather be a lizard an' fry my grease out onto the hot bowlders."

"And you propose to go into the mine?" questioned Dell of Pendergast, smiling in spite of herself.

"Yes! The Tom-cat thinks it the best plan. We want a vote of the Triad. What do you say?"

"Me? Why, I say yes; if you believe you can accomplish anything—and will promise to be careful!"

"Hooray!" shouted the Tom-cat, pleased into momentary self-forgetfulness. He was about to give vent to a joyful "meow," also, but recollected himself in time to thrust the catskin cap into his mouth and hold it back.

"Deed, miss, you're a trump!" he declared, not able to withhold all expression. "You've got a backbone, you have. I like to see a person with some sand in their craw."

It was Miss Devore's turn to blush and cough; and Pendergast deftly changed the conversation into a new channel.

"I reckon the men air a-waitin' fer us!" said the Tom-cat, after a few minutes of uneasy silence. "I tol' 'em we'd meet 'em jest beyond town."

"In that case we'd better be going!" Pendergast replied.

Dell Devore took the hint and departed, and the men shortly left the office for the rendezvous.

The cowboy had collected the men who had already served Pendergast so faithfully; and it required but a few words to place them in possession of all that it was necessary for them to know.

They succeeded in reaching the house without attracting attention; and at once prepared for the contemplated movement. Arms were examined and got in readiness, sledges produced, and lanterns lighted.

Then two men were left to work the winch, and the others were lowered down the shaft.

The Tom-cat, as guide, placed himself at the head of the little party.

"Keep as quiet as ye kin!" he cautioned. "That air spider mou't be in hyer somewhar; an' ef so, he could make it int'restin' fer us."

The caution brought a sudden cessation of the talking that was irritating him.

"Couldn't hear yer years with sich a gabble as that a-goin' on!" he muttered. "Some men—smart men—ain't jest naterly got enough sense to walk around with when they're trailin'. A nice job of it, they'd make, in a Injun country."

He could hardly control his disgust.

"Now, forrard!" he commanded. "Walk like leaves a-drappin', keep yer mouths tight, an' foller me. Ef I ain't plum fergot my jogerfy lesson, I kin take ye right thar!"

Then he proceeded, counting the steps taken and the angles and bends passed.

"Thar it is!" he said, after a long walk, during which he had not spoken a word. "Thar's the wall. I'm certain of it! But if they ever was a door, it's shorely growed over."

He flashed the light over the jagged wall. Not a break, not a seam, was anywhere visible.

"You are sure this is the place?" questioned Pendergast.

"Well, I thought I was. But that wall don't look like it. Can't see nothin' like a door. Hardly possible to have a door without the jint's a-showin'!"

"Utterly impossible!" Pendergast declared.

The Tom-cat was running his fingers over the rough surface. Then he tapped the wall softly, with the butt of one of his revolvers.

"I reckon I'm off!" he confessed, with a lugubrious laugh. "I'd 'a' swore I was goin' right."

Seems like I'm wrong, though. Le's go back and try it over."

To this Pendergast consented, believing that they were wasting time there. So they retreated, winding here and there, and counting their footsteps.

When they had stepped off the proper number, the cowboy stopped and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Boys, we're lost! We've took the wrong passage somewhar. Blamed ef I know whar. This ought to bring us to the cage. But they ain't no cage hyer! On'y these windin' galleries goin' on forever an' ever!"

Pendergast gave a startled cry. From bitter experience he knew what it was to be lost in the depths of that gloomy mine.

Slowly and sadly they retraced their way, and came again to a wall. But whether it was the same wall or another, they could not tell.

Starting again they measured off the requisite distance, bringing up as before in the apparently endless galleries.

"I give it up!" the cowboy confessed, his face blanching. "We're lost; and I reckon we'll stay hyer tell we starve—er go crazy!"

CHAPTER XII.

TOM-CAT, AS A SHADOW.

ALTHOUGH the Tom-cat said this, and feared the worst, he had no intention of submitting to so terrible a fate without a struggle. He again retraced his way, or attempted to—for he could not be sure of any route after missing the first.

Having reached the wall, they set out in another direction, at a venture, and were soon stumbling among broken boulders and debris. All the avenues in that direction were choked with mine refuse, which had been cast in there to save the labor of hoisting it to the "dump."

"We are accomplishing nothing in this way!" Pendergast declared. "Let's go back a short distance and see if we can rouse our men by shouting."

The suggestion was eagerly seized upon; when they were gathered in a circle they fired a volley from their revolvers; and then shouted with all the strength of their lungs.

"That ought to wake somebody!" asserted the Tom-cat, grimly. "I thought I heard the walls a-crackin'. Mebbe it'll fetch the spider!"

In a short time they fired another volley and again shouted.

To their great joy there was an answering shout; and in the distance they beheld a waving lantern. The distressed men became almost hysterical when they saw that tiny speck of light; and hurried toward it with cries of childish delight.

Hearing their cries the man came toward them. He was one of those left at the winch. He had heard the shots and calls, and not knowing what to make of them had descended to investigate. The other had remained at the winch to pull him up quickly, in case of need.

In coming toward them, he had advanced but a little way from the shaft; and the men knew by that that they had been hopelessly lost when within speaking distance of it.

"It's my opinion that this mine is not a large affair, at all!" Pendergast asserted, when reflection succeeded to the pleasure and excitement of rescue. "We've seen though how easy it is to get lost in it. When I was lost here before, with Miss Devore, we came out on the opposite slope. If we had had the strength, we could have climbed to this side in an hour or less, rough and bad as the route is."

"The dump pile beyond the house is not large. It is overgrown with weeds, now, and looks like a portion of the original hill. Still, there's a great deal of dump refuse stowed away in those passages below. I would really like to know if Dell and I went 'round and 'round through the same galleries. It looks like it!"

Now that they were safe, the Tom-cat was anxious to plunge once more into the search for the concealed door through which the Tarantula had disappeared. But the others refused to venture into the bewildering depths!

"Why the thing kin be fixed easy enough, so't we can't git lost!" he argued. "Let one o' the men stay at the shaft and holler onc't in awhile, er fire off his pistol. That'll lead us back. The thing kin be worked han'some!"

But the men shook their heads. Pendergast, even, did not care to urge them. The cowboy's plan seemed sensible and feasible; but he knew how easy it was to get lost down there.

"It might do no good, even if we could find the door!" he said to the Tom-cat, in extenuation of his passive opposition. "Our shouting and firing probably gave warning to the woman

and her servant. We'd better try some other course, probably."

"We could go to Taulbee's an' make a bold s'arch!" the Tom-cat suggested, loth to give up his plans.

"And bring trouble on our heads likely, if we didn't find them there!"

The cowboy subsided. In his opinion a bold game was always a winning one. But he was out-voted, and manfully acquiesced.

After their return to town, he announced to Pendergast that he intended to quit work in the Phoenix Mine.

"I hain't doin' any yearthly good down thar, an' so I 'low I'll quit!"

"Why, you're not going to drop the entire business?" with questioning surprise.

"Nol! But I'm a-goin' to turn shadder. A reg'lar creepin', crawlin' shadder. Keep it up, day an' night, till I run somethin' down. It's the on'y way. Thar's bushels o' dirt goin' on; an' it kin be got at in that way, likely. It seems the best chance, anyhow, an' I 'low to try it."

In accordance with this plan, the Tom-cat severed his connection with the Phoenix Mine. But he by no means ceased his visits to it. He ingratiated himself with the night watchman, and prowled about the works at all hours of the night. But he discovered nothing there.

He was more successful in the efforts directed at the Taulbee residence. The success came about through a desperate determination, arrived at after much cogitation over the nature of the proposed act.

This act was no less than the entrance of the house itself, under cover of the darkness. Any one less reckless than the cowboy would not have harbored the temptation for a moment.

"I reckon it 'ud put me in a mighty bad light ef I shed git ketched!" he soliloquized. "Two'd be counted burglin', I s'pose, an' the people out this way don't take kindly to burglin'. But, then, why sh'ud I git ketched?"

"I've been figgerin' that the woman an' her darty's in that house. Maby they ain't. The on'y way I know of to find out is to go in thar an' see; er ruther hear, fer I calc'late I'll not git in an' out o' that house 'thout 'tractin' attention."

Usually he went to Pendergast with his schemes. But with this one he did not. He feared Pendergast would oppose it, and insist that it was too risky.

He waited only until it was fairly dark before venturing to put the plan into execution. The earliness of the hour added to the difficulties, but he feared he could not accomplish anything if delayed until later. He hoped to find the fortune-teller or the Tarantula moving about, or talking. His only object was to determine if they were in the house.

Taulbee kept but one servant—an Irish girl, and the cowboy had feared to question her.

It was a warm evening, and the front door was left open after dark, to allow the air to circulate freely. Hence he had no difficulty in gaining an entrance. But when he stood, in his bare feet, in the unlighted hall, he was quite at a loss what step to take next.

There were voices in the room at the end of this hall. It was lighted, too, for the rays of the lamp came through a little transom and fell upon the ceiling overhead. He crept softly up to the door of this room; but he could distinguish neither voices nor words. Nor could he see anything by peering through the key-hole.

"A sneakin' bizness!" he muttered. "It makes me feel mean enough to go off an' hang myself. The idee o' the Tom-cat a-pryin' aroun' into men's private houses. Ef the case wasn't so desprit I'd say 'twas 'most as bad as boss-stealin'. But what kin a feller do? This hyer scoundrel Taulbee has got a lot o' property that don't belong to him. Seems like the law can't tech him, the way things is. He's cunnin' as a fox; and I reckon 'tain't no harm to put cunnin' ag'in' cunnin', ef the cause is good enough to jestify it."

Thus quieting his conscience, he listened again; with the same lack of success.

There was a door opening from the hall into another room; and into this room he slipped, hoping for better luck.

Again he was disappointed.

As he was about to leave this room, the door at the end of the hall opened; and a man came out. He believed it was Taulbee, although he did not get to see him. The man passed into the yard and presumably on into the street.

The movement left the Tom-cat in a predicament. The door entering the room from which the man had emerged, remained open and the hall was flooded with light, making it impossible for the cowboy to retreat that way.

The door by which the Tom-cat had entered the side room was also slightly ajar. Through it a hum of voices came to him; but, as before, he could not recognize them.

"Trapped, by ginger!" he growled. "I can't go neither forrards nor back'ards. I'd give 'most anything to know who that is a-talkin'. Maby it's the lady o' the house an' the sarvant; an' maby it's the identical critters I'm after. This is jest too aggervatin'!"

On glancing about in the semi-gloom, he discovered a window through which he believed he could escape, if pressed. This discovery quieted him; and he concluded to stay in the house awhile longer.

For an hour or more he remained there, hearing voices and footsteps in the other room. Then the sounds ceased, some one passed through the hall, closed the doors, and the house seemed given over to darkness and quiet.

The Tom-cat stole softly into the hall, scarcely knowing what course now to take, when the door of that back room again opened, and out of the flood of light walked the Tombstone Tarantula.

It was so unexpected that the cowboy was taken completely by surprise. The Tarantula seemed scarcely less astonished. He recovered, however, before the Tom-cat could get out his weapons.

A glance served to show that the room from which the negro had come was now wholly unoccupied.

"Put away dem dah shootin'-irons, Misteh Tom-cat!" he cried, as the latter's hands went to his revolvers. "Ef you 'temp' to shoot dish yeh chile, he squall out powerful foh Mawster Taulbee come an' larrup you. What you pokin' yo' nose th'u dish yeh house foh, anyhow? Dat's a mighty mean trick—sneakin' th'u a gemman's house! I'se s'prised at you! 'Deed I am!"

The coolness of the negro's manner irritated the cowboy. He did not like to be placed in the wrong by this fugitive from justice.

"I thought you was in the mine!" he stammered, with difficulty controlling his wrath.

The negro gave vent to a contortion of laughter.

"Yah! yah! You fine off'sehs, you an' Misteh Pendergast am! Fines' kin! You think I gwine stay in dat 'ah mine jes' lack a skeered possum? But come dis way a minit. I wantar speak wid you, now you heah. We wake up de folkses talkin'!"

He turned to the room from which he had just come; and the Tom-cat, scarcely knowing whether to retreat or advance, followed.

It was not a large room, but it was comfortably furnished. A hand-lamp stood on a table near the center, and by its light the cowboy studied the features of the negro in momentary expectation of treachery.

But the latter had no notion of attempting anything of the kind, or of resorting to violence. The cowboy was too well armed, and altogether too alert to make an offensive movement safe.

"Now, I wantar ax you some questions," he said, backing toward a curtained wall or entrance at the opposite side of the room. "Why you come heah, in de fu'st place?"

"I don't know that that's any of yer bizness!" replied the cowboy, regaining his coolness.

"Yah! yah! Peppah an' fiab, jes' lack de obehseah on de ole plantation when I was a boy! You needn't min' answeh dese heah queschins less'n you wantar."

The cowboy knew not what reply to make to this.

"I know what mek you come! You come foh dis berry nigger! Lemme toke you, now, you'll nebber git him! Nebber! You do' know me, I see, Misteh Tom-cat! I'se been hoo-dooed er somepin' by de mist'ess, so dat I cya'n't be taken."

"I know you been lookin' foh me. Lackwise you been th'u de mine lookin' foh her. You been heah an' yondeh, an' all 'roun'. You git los', an' fin' yo'se'f ag'in; an' you worrit yo'se'f gre't deal wid speckylatin' what come o' dese yeh folkses. An' all de time de T'rantly watchin' you!"

The cowboy twisted uneasily.

"How much o' that air yarn did you make up in your woolly head?"

The negro laughed, as if the question did not disturb him.

"I know yo' intendments. De young 'oman an' young gemman down-town fillin' you wid nonsense an' gittin' you to poke dat catskin cap into trouble."

The cowboy became interested, and coolly took a chair.

"Dat's right an' comf'able!" seating himself also. "Now we kin talk lack two ole frien's. I been wantin' speak wid you dis good while. Been wantin' to 'form you dat you bettah drop dis yeh bizness."

"Why so?" demanded the cowboy, amazed at his own coolness and at the negro's audacity. "Why d'ye think I'd better drap it?"

"Ca'sel Best ob reasons! I heah Mistah Taulbee say dat ef cert'in, p'tickler men what was now pesterin' him wid foolshness, an' stirrin' up ructions 'g'in' him didn't quit hit, den he'd see dat dey went away some'eres an' nebber got back. You is one ob dem men!"

There was a sepulchral earnestness in the words, and the cowboy shuddered in spite of himself.

"An' mo'. You can't 'complish nuffin'! Dish yeh prop'ty b'longs to Mistah Taulbee. He say so! Yo' friends is playin' wid you. I don't wantin' injuh a man what hab family to suppo't him. But min' my word. Min' hit! De T'rant'ly o' Tombstone is gittin' ready to leap. When he do, he hit de Tom-cat fust man. Mistah Taulbee is gre't frien' o' mine. He look aftah me. He pay me. When he say leap, den I leap!"

"Two kin play at that game!" cried the cowboy, endeavoring to appear unruffled. "I'll be a-leapin', too, 'bout that time. Ef that's all you've got to say, I guess I'll go. Much obleeged fer not jumpin' onto me an' causin' a fight. I'll remember it in your favor. It was a sneak-in' trick crawlin' in hyer; an' I calc'late I'll not do it ag'in."

He was about to rise, when the negro interrupted him.

"Mighty sorry you won't gib up dish yeh bizness. Study 'bout hit. Now, I'm gwine."

He drew back his hand as if to hurl something, and vanished.

The Tom-cat hurried to the place where he had been standing. Seemingly he had disappeared behind the curtains. These connected the room with another. But the Tarantula was not in it. He had disappeared completely and almost instantaneously.

"Guess I'd better git out o' hyer!" he muttered. "He may be hid some'eres, and take a notion to shoot at me. Or he may 'rouse the house!"

He slipped quietly into the hall, and from thence hastened into the street.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PAIR OF WARNINGS.

As the Tom-cat hurried from the house he became aware of a painful, pricking sensation in his breast. An examination showed that his clothing had been perforated by a tiny gold dagger, bearing a skull and cross-bones on its hilt.

His amazement was great. Then he recalled the quick, throwing motion given by the Tarantula just before disappearing. The tiny dagger had been hurled at that moment.

It was plain that the negro had not tried to kill him. The dagger was too small, the blade being barely long enough to pass through the clothing and scratch the skin. Doubtless it was intended as a warning. The negro could have fired a shot or thrown a heavier dagger with equal ease. The thought was a startling and disquieting one.

Such evidence of deadly skill was quite unexpected. And the coolness of the negro's threat was not calculated to make the cowboy feel more comfortable. What did the Tarantula mean by saying that he was almost ready to leap?

The Tom-cat, however, was not given to long gazing at the perilous side of any affair. Still less of one in which his heart had become engaged and his pride aroused.

"Let him leap, ef he wants to!" he gritted. "He'll find me ready. I never backed down yit from a plain duty, jest because thar was likely to be danger in the trail. Queer, though, how the feller acted to-night. I can't squar'ly understand it. He could 'a' drowned me prob'ly, as easy as to 'a' throwed this thing."

"Great Gov'ner!"

He started as if stung.

The pricked point in his breast still pained slightly; and the startling thought had come that perhaps the dagger-point was poisoned. Then his imagination evoked strange thrills and stinging sensations, and he trembled from head to foot.

"I've heerd o' sech things!" he whispered. "Some o' the Injun tribes knows how to tip th'ir arrers with p'izen; an' a scratch, it's said, will kill a man. 'Pears to me the thing's be-ginnin' to burn now!"

He started on with quickened steps, determined to call on Pendergast and have him make an examination of the injury. Then, if danger was anticipated, a physician could be called.

Pendergast was not at his lodgings, and the cowboy sought the home of Dell Devore, convinced that he would find the young lawyer there.

He was not mistaken; and a little later was ushered into the parlor, where Pendergast was sitting with his sweetheart.

By this time, however, the pricking sensations had ceased somewhat—his imagination having cooled down—and he was almost ashamed of his recent fears.

The young people had been conferring quite earnestly, and appeared to be rather annoyed and perplexed.

"Come in!" cried Pendergast heartily. "We've been thinking of sending for you."

"Glad to know it!" said the Tom-cat, placing his cap on a chair and sitting on it. He feared his sudden intrusion might not be pleasing.

"I've had an adventoor to-night that knocks the persimmons!"

His interest in the subject almost cured him for the time of his timidity.

"See that!" and he tossed the dagger to Pendergast. "Come out into the hall a minit. I want you to look at somethin'."

The young man arose and followed him. The hall was lighted; and, standing beneath the reflecting lamp, the Tom-cat bared his breast and showed the tiny wound.

"The gold dagger done that! D'ye think it's swellin' any? I don't want you to laugh at me; but I've been afeard the thing was p'izen."

Pendergast carefully examined the scratch, and said that no swelling was visible.

"Now, what does it all mean?" he questioned.

"The Tarantula throwed it!"

"The Tarantula! Come into the parlor. This is something I want Dell to hear about."

In vain the cowboy demurred. Pendergast insisted, and they returned to the parlor.

"Well, the spider throwed that thing at me, an' it went through my coat. I made shore I was p'izen by it!"

And with this as a preliminary, the Tom-cat related his adventures of the night.

"And you talked with the Tarantula face to face in that manner? It equals Dell's experience."

"Yes; you are not alone in having a story to tell!" she exclaimed with attempted cheerfulness. "And while mine hasn't any tragic elements in it, it is almost as startling. At any rate, the experience was startling enough!"

"I was sitting by the window, there, with the sash hoisted, shortly after dark. The cool night air was pleasant, and I never thought any one might venture into the garden. I hadn't lighted the lamp yet."

"Suddenly a man came out of the shrubbery, and walked toward the house. I supposed he was one of the servants, and paid little attention to him. But he came right up to the window, to my great surprise. Then I saw it was a negro."

"I was startled then, and was on the point of screaming out. But he made a motion and said:

"'Missy Devo', I wantin' speak wid you jes' a minit!"

"Oh, I can't imitate his dialect!" laughing. "So I'll tell it in my own words."

"Well, he stated that you two were following him and his mistress, with the intention of causing their arrest. Also that we three were leagued against Silas Taulbee."

"Then he raised his hands and darted at me such a look as I'll never forget. I can hear him yet; and see his eyes shine, just as they shone there in the darkness. And he said that if Pendergast didn't drop this affair it would result in murder. That he, the Tarantula of Tombstone, was getting ready to leap—whatever that meant—and that the leap would be Pendergast's death-signal."

"It terrifies me to repeat it. And his looks! I can't describe them. They were fiendish! Malignant!"

She covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out the terrible sight.

"The scoundrel!" sputtered the cowboy. "He must 'a' jest come from hyer when I met him. Ef I'd knowed he'd been skeerin' you that-a-way I'd shorely been tempted to plug him!"

Pendergast was evidently annoyed and uneasy.

"He must be brave to venture on the streets when he knows my men are watching for him!"

"Brave as a 'Pache!" declared the cowboy.

"I saw that when we had our little confab in

the back room. He didn't seem a mite afeard o' my weepin. My 'pinion is, he's a dangerous nigger. He'll be apt to prove hisself a 't'rantly' shore enough."

"Oh, I don't know what to think!" Dell declared. "I don't know what to advise. Perhaps we'd better do as he says: drop the matter right where it is. We're not making any headway; and he may try to put his threats into execution. That negro is a fiend. I could see that quite readily, in his eyes!"

"Nary time!" exclaimed the cowboy. "Let 'im leap, an' be hanged. I don't back nary inch."

"The Tom-cat is right!" Pendergast asserted. "I don't think we ought to entertain the thought of retreat for a moment. These very warnings prove to me that we are making headway. If we were not, why should our movements annoy Taulbee? We are gaining ground. He fears we will yet overthrow him. So he sends this tool to utter threats in hope of terrifying us into dropping the matter."

"My sentiments!" cried the cowboy. "You're a-talkin'! He's a-gittin' skeered. An' we kin skeer him wuss to-morrer—or to-night, fer that matter. Gether yer men, take yer warrants an' drag this fortune-teller an' her darky out o' thar. It kin be done. Then we'll be able to make 'em talk. They'll talk lively, ef they think they kin git away by doin' of it; and what they say'll be mighty likely to go hard ag'in' Taulbee."

"But you forget!" Pendergast interrupted. "You stated just a bit ago that the Tarantula disappeared almost before your very eyes. Won't he be able to repeat the trick if we go after him?"

The cowboy's jaw dropped. He had quite forgotten that.

"What air we to do, then?" he questioned.

"Drop the matter, please!" pleaded Dell.

"The more I think of that negro, the more I believe his threats mean deadly peril to both of you. I could never forgive myself if anything serious was to occur. It's only selfishness that has prompted me to urge you this far. I much prefer that Taulbee should keep the property than that you should risk your lives further in trying to dispossess him."

Her manner distressed both her lover and the Tom-cat.

"Don't, please!" the latter protested. "You turn my blood to water. We're men, miss, I hopes! An' men never turns their backs on a plain duty. That T'rantly's a p'izen critter, likely. But we'll keep our eyes open. I don't think 'at the danger is anyways ser'us!"

Pendergast expressed himself in a similar strain.

"Come, come, Dell! Pluck up a little courage! At this moment you are hardly the brave little woman I am accustomed to seeing. That negro's appearance, and the threats, have made you unduly nervous, that's all! You will be yourself again in the morning, I have no doubt!"

"And now," turning to the Tom cat, "what course had we better pursue?"

"I don't know anything better than to jest keep up the shadder business. That is, ef you think we'd better hold off about raiding Taulbee's house. To-morrer night, ef all goes well, I'll crawl into his cellar, an' see ef I kin find the door that leads, as we spoke, into the mine. I may be able to make some other discoveries, too. Onexpected, like to-night, you know!"

As delay seemed best, this plan was finally agreed on, and a little later the Tom-cat withdrew, leaving the lovers to discuss the events of the evening at their leisure.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TARANTULA LEAPS.

THE Tarantula of Tombstone evidently changed his mind on some material points. Perhaps the cowboy's undaunted manner under threats brought about the change. At any rate, he did not wait to see if the warnings given would be heeded, but prepared at once for the "leap" hinted at. The Tom-cat had not been gone from the little parlor of Dell's lodging-house ten minutes, when the Tarantula advanced along the trail leading toward it, accompanied by a number of masked men.

"Mawster Taulbee say we slip down heah, an' wait foh dat man," he whispered, dropping into the grass a couple of hundred yards from the house. "He berry p'tick'lar in his awdehs!"

"Yes, durn him! He's pertick'ler about a good many things. I don't like this hyer bizness any too well; an' ef he hadn't tol' me it jes' had to be done, blamed ef I'd 'a' come!"

The fellow was evidently angered at the idea of having a negro placed in command over him.

"What's the young feller done, anyhow? I ain't heerd the story, yit," growled another.

"Inimy o' de boss!" answered the Tarantula. "Dat's all I knows. He don't s'plain his 'tentions an' 'siderations to dis chile no mo'n he do to de res'. He give awdebs an' I cyarry 'um out. His awdebs an' corrections 'bout dis young man berry p'inted too!"

"Well, what war they? He didn't have time to tell me anything sca'cely. Said to do as you said. An' that the chap wuz to be put out o' the way."

"Corrections was to hide heah an' nab him w'en he come out'n dat house. Den you-uns was to cyarry him to de ole mine—down into de mine, you on'erstan'—an' w'en de s'plosion comes you is to hang 'im!"

"Explosion!"

"Yah! yah! Mawse Taulbee not tell you 'bout dat s'plosion? Dat mighty cur'us."

"He didn't have time to tell us anything!" the fellow growled, disliking exceedingly to take his knowledge at second-hand from this detested negro. "He was in a terrible hurry, an' hustled us off hyer as fast as we could go."

The Tarantula chuckled.

"Well, dat s'plosion make a mighty ruction, now, I tell you! Mawse Taulbee say dish yeah Tom-cat batter be put out'n de way. Do' know w'y; but Mawse Taulbee sasso, an' dat's 'nuff fo' me! Dish yeah Tom-cat, he sleep in de little white house obeh de ole mine. De little house what got dat 'ah quah h'istin' 'sheen in bit. You recomembers dat house, I 'low?"

"Yes; o' course we do. Go on! Don't stop to tell us how the house looks an' what all it's got in it."

"Yah! yah! You in berry big hurry mighty suddent, 'pears to me! Well, de Tom-cat lib in dat 'ah house. Leas'wise he sleep in bit. I gwine put giant powdeh cahterges in dat house, when de Tom-cat sleepin', an' blow him cl'ah into de iliments!"

The men shuddered, hardened as they were.

"Did Taulbee tell you to do that?"

"To be sho! An' w'en you heah dat s'plosion you mus' pull de young chap up by de naik."

"But ain't there some danger that it 'll knock in the roof of the mine?" one of the men asked of another.

"Oh, I reckon not. We'll have to resk it. It's most too deep down there ter that."

"Why didn't the boss have us rake in the Tom-cat as we're to do this fellow?" questioned the first speaker, again addressing the Tarantula.

"Kiyi! Him 'feared to!" was the chuckling answer. "De Tom-cat pow'ful fighter w'en he git his dandeh up. An' he squall jes' like a fightin' Tom-cat, sho' 'nuff. He wake de town, dat man would, w'en he git to screech-ifyin' dat way. An' he sart'in kill somebody. But dat s'plosion fix 'im so he cyain' do nuffin'. Jes' sail away, sail away, tell he hit de moon—biff! Nobody know what made de s'plosion. Nobody killed but de Tom-cat. Mighty fin', dat plan o' Mawse Taulbee's! Fines' kin'!"

He gave a low whistle, as he ceased, and sunk to the ground out of sight. The front door of the house had opened, and Pendergast stepped out into the starlight.

One of the villains grasped a *riata* which lay by his side, and put it in shape for a throw.

Without a thought of peril, Pendergast emerged into the trail and came toward them, at a slow saunter. He was just leaving the presence of the woman he loved, and doubtless his mind was filled with tender memories and fond anticipations.

The boarding-house stood back from any thoroughfare; and this trail wound through the grass and sage-brush to the street. Near the street the men lay in waiting.

With bowed head and hat pulled over his eyes, Pendergast came on, passed the point where the scoundrels were crouching, and was about to turn toward his lodgings. Then the *riata* swept through the air, the noose settled over his shoulders and about his arms and body, and he was jerked heavily backward. At the same instant the men leaped upon him with leveled weapons.

The surprise was stunning in its completeness; and before he fairly realized what had befallen him, the Tarantula was astride his body, with one sinewy black hand clutching his throat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, when the grip was relaxed somewhat and he could collect his wits sufficiently to frame the question.

For reply two of the men leaped to the negro's

assistance, and Pendergast's hands were bound tight and fast.

Then he was lifted to his feet.

"No queschins, now, you Misteh Pendergast!" cried the Tarantula, sternly. "P'int yo' nose up de trail an' 'gin foh to trabble. We ain' got no time foh s'plainications, we ain'!"

"But I want to know what your intentions are!" he exclaimed.

He struggled and seemed on the point of screaming out.

"Yah! Yah! Lake a buckin' muel, jes' foh all de worl'! Trabble on, now, an' while we gwine mebbe I kin fin' time to tell you."

Pendergast was becoming calmer. He saw that struggles were useless, and any attempt to bring assistance would probably result in his death. He was convinced that their intentions were deadly, but he hoped to be able to foil them in some way, if time enough was given.

"I submit!" he said, as one of the men advanced with a gag. "Don't put that in my mouth, please!"

"Well, we will, now, ef you go to gawpin'!" the fellow asserted, brutally. "We ain't a-goin' to have the town brought down onto us. We've got a little bizness transaction to 'tend to with you; an' we don't propose to hev it interfered with."

"I have submitted. Isn't that enough?"

"Go 'long wid you, then!" commanded the negro. "We ain' gwine stan' no speechifyin'!"

There was no help for it, and Pendergast started along the trail in the direction indicated, his captors closing about him.

For some time the advance was like a solemn and stately march, in which not a word was uttered.

Then Pendergast broke out again with questions.

"Why did you rope me? And what do you mean to do with me?"

They were leaving the town, now, and the negro seemed willing to answer.

"What we gwine do wid you; Misteh Pendergast? Why, we gwine 'muse ourse'ves wid you, to be sho'. We gwine practice see how much yo' naik 'll stretch 'fo' it break smack off. Yah! yah!"

There was a depth of suggestive and horrible malignity in the words and tones.

"You mean that you intend to hang me?" he said, endeavoring to nerve himself for the worst. "It is what I expected."

"Gwine take you into de mine!" chuckled the negro. "Nice, cool place, dat ole mine is. Fines' kind. Frien's cyain' nebbber fin' you; an' so won't hab any cause teh worry 'bout you. Jes' be a man missin'. Man missin' mos' eber' day in dish yeah country. Pow'ful sight er strangeli's aroun' yeah. Road-agen's, hoss-stealehs, an' sich lack! Hones' men sca'ce lack hens' teef. Man missin' don' count foh nuffin' yeah!"

He seemed to derive a sort of malicious satisfaction in thus holding before the bound man the terrors and helplessness of his situation.

Pendergast became silent. He knew, now, that he was in the power of men as heartless as fiends. Why question them, and thus furnish opportunity for taunts and gibes?

Soon the little building above the mine came into view. It was dark and deserted, and scarcely discernible from the black background of hill and dump-pile. Into this building he was led. Then one of the men produced and lighted a dark lantern.

It was the first opportunity he had had of observing them. But the observation revealed little. With the exception of the Tarantula, they were all heavily masked. He stood, bold and defiant, with face uncovered, and a wicked smile hovering about his red lips.

"One mo' word o' 'struction!" he said, as the men were about to step into the cage with the prisoner. "Don't fo'git dat s'plosion. An' I done change my min' some 'bout hit. W'en you yeah dat s'plosion you wait jes' a hour foh me. 'F I don' come in a hour go ahead wid what I tole you. You on'erstan'?"

"What does he mean by that explosion?" Pendergast questioned.

"You'll learn soon enough!" was the unsatisfactory answer.

Then, the Tarantula being assured that his orders were fully comprehended and would be obeyed, the cage slowly descended into the dark shaft.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EXPLOSION.

THE Tom-cat, as he walked away from the house, was not altogether pleased with the programme mapped out. And the more he

pondered the situation the more he was displeased. He had suggested an immediate advance. Delay was not well suited to his disposition. He wanted to end the struggle by one quick and crushing blow.

"Bluff is my idee!" he whispered. "Bluff is allus the way to win. Ef you ain't got cards enough in a game o' this kind, rake in the pot with a pistol. We've been shilly-shallyin', shilly-shallyin', and 'complishin' nothin'."

In this frame of mind he strolled about, pondering the subject and trying to reach some definite conclusion or evolve a better plan than any yet suggested. Finally he started back.

"I'm goin' to insist on perceedin' at onc't!" he growled. "They're there to-night—the nigger, Taulbee an' all! Mebbe they won't be to-morrer!"

As he drew near the house, he saw a group of men marching slowly and solemnly up the trail. They seemed to have a prisoner in their midst. He could not be sure of that, however, owing to the darkness. He did not dream that the prisoner might be Pendergast. Still it was a matter demanding investigation. Very likely some innocent man had fallen into the hands of a crazy mob. The Tom-cat had seen too much of the erratic and irresponsible doings of Judge Lynch, to fancy them.

So he crept quietly along in the rear of the party, straining his eyes and ears to little purpose. He could hear the sounds of voices, but could not distinguish the words uttered.

When they turned toward the mine building his amazement was great.

"Takin' the chap to my boardin' house. I'd like to whisper into their ears that that's a private hotel, with on'y 'commodations fer one. But mebbe they wouldn't take kindly to it. I must see this thing through."

Then, for the first time, he recognized the peculiar dialect of the Tarantula. The latter had incautiously lifted his voice, so that it came distinctly to the Tom-cat.

"Jingo! That's the nigger! An' I do believe he's captered Pendergast. They was near that air boardin'-house when I fust seen 'em. Yes, sir; they grabbed the young feller as he was leavin'—an' they're bent on murder, I'm satisfied. Now, what kin I do to sp'ile their little picnic?"

It was a question not easily answered. The men were entering the house with their prisoner, and, for a moment, the Tom-cat was on the point of giving utterance to his war-cry and charging with all his impetuous recklessness. He knew it might be suicidal, but even with that knowledge he could scarcely restrain himself. He muttered a half-score of low "meows," his fingers played convulsively with his weapons, and his glaring eyes seemed to shoot fire.

"No," he whispered, drawing in his breath, with a great sigh. "I mustn't! It'd ruin everything. But I'd give a cool hundred ef I could scream jest onc't. It hurts me to stan' hyer jes' a-drawin' my claws in an' out an' afeard to use 'em. Law! couldn't I down one o' them fellers purty, now? I'm 'most a notion to, anyway, resk er no resk. Mebbe I could stampede 'em!"

The light, which one of the men produced, revealed everything clearly: the bound man, the masked faces, and the spider-like form of the Tombstone Tarantula. Then the outer door was closed, and the Tom-cat stood in the darkness.

Creeping up to the door he peeped through the key-hole, and could thus see all that transpired.

"Ef they propose to hang the young feller I'll make a break anyhow. Cricky! They're goin' to take him into the mine. Now, what's that fur? They could hang 'im hyer as well as thar! I'm bound to foller."

He stopped his anxious mutterings. The Tarantula was addressing the masked men, and instructing them to hang the prisoner if he did not appear within an hour after the explosion.

The cowboy could not comprehend his entire meaning. But he drew a great breath of relief. Pendergast was not to be hung at once. An hour would elapse. No explosion had yet occurred; and the hanging was not to take place until an hour after the explosion.

"That's all bunk!" he soliloquized. "Ef I don't git the boy out o' their clutches inside of an hour, I'll go into the granger bizness fer the balance o' my nateral days. I will so! I'll foller 'em, an' somethin's bound to turn up in our favor inside of an hour."

The cage descended into the depths, leaving the Tarantula standing in the hall. For a moment the cowboy could not tell what had become of the negro. But the latter quickly produced and lighted another lantern.

For several minutes the Tarantula remained in the hall, as if uncertain what course to pursue, and the cowboy watched him through the key-hole.

"Drat him! I can't do nothin', long's he stays thar! Ef I was close enough I'd like to punch him on the head. I 'low, though, that I'm safe while I keep him in sight. They're not to hang Pendergast tell he comes. Ef he don't come 'thin an hour after the explosion, up the boy goes. What kind of an explosion d'ye calc'late he meant?"

The black shifted his position, placed the light so it could not be seen from the outside, and came to the door behind which the cowboy was standing. The latter withdrew into the shadows, uncertain whether to leap upon the negro or not, should he appear.

But, the Tarantula did not come out at that moment. He simply flattened his nose against the lock and peered through the key-hole out toward the trail. Then he walked back, entered the room at the further end of the hall and for a time disappeared.

The Tom-cat could hear him all the while, though he could not imagine what he was doing.

"Up to some devilment, I'll be boun'!" was the uneasy command. "I don't much like to stand hyer waitin' this-a-way. Mebbe they've got the young feller harness'd afore now. But I don't hardly know what to do. Can't git by that spider very easy, 'thout him diskiverin' me; an' I s'pose that'd spile ever'thing. He'd sing out to the fellers below; I'd have a fight onto my hands; and afore I could git cl'ar of it the young man'd be deader'n a bu'sted minin'-camp."

He drew his revolvers, half-tempted to slip to one of the windows and shoot the darky when he again appeared; but the creature came into the hall, at that moment, and the Tom-cat dropped the weapons back into place.

This time the Tarantula advanced to the door and opened it. Then he closed it softly behind him and stepped out into the darkness.

"Blamed ef I don't b'lieve he's a-waitin' fer me!" the cowboy whispered excitedly, as he crouched in the shadows. "He's a-waitin' fer me to come home. Then he 'lows to nab me while I'm asleep. He's a slick 'un! Told me to-night he'd hol' off awhile, jest to throw me off my guard. An' at the same time was gittin' ready to pounce onto both o' us. I reckon this is what he calls his leap!"

His excitement became so great, at this thought, that he could hardly contain himself in quiet.

The Tarantula, after hearkening a little, turned and walked along the building, in the heavy shadows. In doing so he passed within arm's length of the crouching cowboy.

The temptation, to one of the latter's temperament, was simply irresistible. With a startling howl, cat-like and terrifying, he launched himself at the negro's back.

The assault was so unexpected that the Tarantula went down beneath it. Then the Tom-cat grappled with him, with terrible fury. With the advantage of a surprise, his agility was more than a match for the negro's strength. With a quick and powerful blow he stunned him into partial insensibility; then tied him with a stout cord which he fished from the crown of the big, catskin cap.

The Tarantula speedily recovered consciousness and sat up, blinking at the Tom-cat like an owl. He did not offer to renew his struggles.

"Why you do dis yah?" he asked, as if astounded at the outrage.

"I shouldn't think you'd need to ask, seein' t you was waitin' fer me an' calc'latin' to do me a good deal wuss trick."

The negro stared.

"No use in playin' sweet innocence, thar ain't. 'Twon't do you any good. I'm up to yer little scheme. Pendergast is down in the mine, now, with a lot o' men, and you thought you'd capter me an' take me down thar, too. Then you'd have a double hangin'. Er, it may be, you intended to blow me up with the house after I went to sleep."

The Tarantula's surprise was now genuine.

"Oh, I've been a-watchin' ye an' a-listenin', too. I follered ye plum from town; an' I know purty near all about what ye'r' up to."

The negro subsided with a groan.

"You'll groan wuss'n that ef ye don't talk straight. Where'd them men take Pendergast?"

"Inteh de mine!"

"K'rect! An' they intend to hang 'im. Well, they'll be apt to wait a good while before they hear that explosion. I 'low to leave you trussed

up hyer tell I come back. I'm goin' into that mine, you understand! An' thar'll be a few of them chaps less'n they air now, afore another hour. I'd ought to kill you, by rights. You may git away and make trouble."

The negro began to quake and beg.

"Shet up, er I'll be tempted to do it, shore. You're naterally too p'izen mean to live. A man that'll call hisself a 'trant'ly ought to be smashed, same as ef he reely was one o' them black spiders, shore 'nough."

He was working as he talked, and now slipped a gag into the negro's mouth.

"That'll keep you from callin' out an' lettin' any one know you're hyer. Now, I'm goin'. Ef you're wise you'll keep quiet tell I come back. Strainin' 'll only draw the knots tighter."

He turned away, listened a few moments to the negro's heavy breathing, and then entered the house.

He had no sooner done so than the Tarantula slipped the bonds from his wrists, and began to tug at the choking and suffocating gag.

The negro had resorted to an old trick, but one that can only be worked successfully after long practice. When bound he had distended the muscles of his wrists and arms, thus making them much larger than they naturally were. On again assuming their normal size, the cords fell loosely about them; and as his hands were small compared with the size of his wrists, it was no difficult feat to slip the nooses over them.

As soon as the gag was removed, he drew a knife and cut the cords from his ankles. Then he hurried to the door and peeped into the hall. The Tom-cat was in the bed-room, evidently preparing for a descent into the mine.

With a smothered cry of joy, the negro slipped around the house, hoisted a window and crept into the room at the rear of the hall. The door was slightly ajar; and the rays of the lantern coming through the opening, showed a quantity of giant powder cartridges heaped up on the floor.

At this moment the Tom-cat came out of the room, entered the cage, which had been raised for the accommodation of the negro, and got ready to descend into the depths.

"Die! Die!" hissed the Tarantula, applying a match to a shortened fuse, and leaping backward through a window. Then as the fuse sputtered and hissed, he ran for his life through the darkness.

"Well, hyer goes!" exclaimed the cowboy grimly, as the cage began to descend. "Now, we'll see what we'll see!"

The motion of the machinery drowned the sputtering of the fuse.

Then—

A terrific explosion shook the earth, and the Tom-cat knew no more.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE MINE.

PENDERGAST as he descended with his captors into the mine, determined to make a bold dash for liberty, if the shadow of a chance offered. With a start of a hundred feet, and the protection of a rocky angle it would be impossible for them to retake him or even stop his flight with a bullet. He preferred to trust himself to the labyrinthine passages and perish of starvation and thirst, to dying like a felon at the end of a rope.

It was a desperate resolve. Bound as he was, he could do little to aid himself should he succeed in getting away.

But he was given no opportunity to put his plans into execution. When the cage reached the bottom of the shaft, one of the men advanced, carrying the lantern. The others closed about him and moved forward with him in their midst.

They advanced for some distance along the galleries, and finally stopped where a lacing beam overhead seemed to offer what they wanted.

"As good as we kin find!" said the man with the lantern, who had assumed the functions of leader. "An' it's fur enough from the shaft to keep that explosion frum knockin' us cendways. I on'y hopes the nigger'll git killed a-touchin' the thing off."

There was a universal assent.

"The idee o' Taulbee a-puttin' sich a critter as that over men like us! White men! It's enough to make a feller strike ag'in' the hull thing."

A thought occurred to Pendergast, as he listened to these growling comments. These men were evidently working for money. They were thoroughly unscrupulous. Would it not be possible to outbid Taulbee and purchase a release?

"How much would it be worth to you to let

me go?" he asked, looking at them sharply. "Name the sum, a reasonable one, and perhaps I can pay it."

The leader gazed at him curiously before replying.

"What'll ye give?"

"All a man hath will he give in exchange for his life!" he answered, lowly and earnestly.

The fellow beckoned his comrades to one side, and conferred with them.

"Can't do it!" he said, returning.

Pendergast's hopes had risen considerably, and this was a bitter blow.

"Why not?" eagerly. "I will make it worth your while. What do you say to a thousand dollars apiece? It would push me to raise such a sum, but I can do it, I think, by borrowing. A thousand dollars is no small sum of money."

"Can't do it," the man repeated, though his eyes shone covetously. "I don't mind sayin'—fer ye'll never have a chance to tell it—that we'd like to. But we don't dare. That's the trouble, pardner! We don't dare. Our lives wouldn't be w'ith shucks."

"Why not?" Pendergast persisted. "I can protect you from Taulbee, if he's the one you're afraid of. If released, I'll have him by the heels in a little while, and he'll have all he can do to look out for himself, without bothering you. Think of it again! A thousand dollars apiece! And I'll use my influence to get any prosecutions dismissed that may be brought against you."

"You don't know Taulbee!" declared the man. "Nobody 'round hyer knows him like I do. He's a devil, I tell you. A regular devil. He knows enough to hang ever' one o' us fellers, ef he was minded to spit it out. An' that's what he'd do, ef we sh'd let you go. He'd have us hung, ef he had to be hung alongside o' us fer doin' it. That's Taulbee!"

The fellow shuddered, and looked over his shoulder in a furtive way, as if he half-expected to see Taulbee at his elbow.

Pendergast repeated his offers, increased the amount, and used all his powers of persuasion to induce them to release him. It was in vain. They would do nothing.

"I suppose you intend to hang me?" he said at last, despairingly.

"Yes! That's what the orders calls fer!" in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable. "The nigger has orders to lay out yer pardner, the Tom-cat. Then he's to come down yer'an' see that we do this job up right."

"You spoke of an explosion?" questioningly.

"That's the way he's to kill the Tom-cat. Blow up the house, with him in it. And," looking at his watch by the light of the lantern, "it's a-tickin' long toward the time. The Tom-cat will turn in about midnight, likely. Then it will take a half an hour fer him to git quieted down so't it'll be safe fer the 'Trant'ly to tech off the ca'tridges!"

He closed his watch nonchalantly, and turned to his comrades.

Pendergast had now lost all hope. It was terrible to thus stand there, waiting for the sound of an explosion that was to hurl a friend to death, and to realize that he himself must speedily follow that friend.

His brain swam with the tide of despairing reflections that poured through it.

He thought of his childhood, his youth, and his manhood. Of the loving faces around the old home circle so far away, and the many warm and true friends of the long ago. Then his mind returned to the Tombstone and present.

How he longed to see Dell Devore, his sweetheart, if only for one brief, fleeting moment. He would like to kiss her lips, look into her clear eyes, and say good-by.

He realized that the minutes were speeding, and tried to compose himself for the inevitable. He turned his thoughts heavenward and Godward, and gained strength and composure from the effort.

Suddenly the very walls of the mine were shaken. The wild, rough men turned ashy pale and trembled. It seemed the rocking shock of an earthquake. Then to their ears came the dull and muffled boom of the explosion.

"I suppose the Tom-cat is dead!" Pendergast soliloquized, awed and horrified. "Poor fellow! A braver and more generous heart never beat. But why should I mourn for him? My time will come next!"

"Must'a used a ton o' powder!" exclaimed the leader, with an attempt at laughter, which was an utter and dismal failure. "I thought the rocks was comin' down on us, shore!"

No one replied, and he relapsed into a grim and expectant silence.

Pendergast was in no mood for idle words. He believed he was doomed, and was endeavoring to prepare himself to meet his fate like a man and a hero.

All too soon the hour passed.

"Time's up!" announced the leader, again examining his watch by the light of the lantern. "The Tarant'ly ain't come, an' his orders was ef he didn't come in an hour, fer us to go ahead."

The others arose, like hyenas scenting prey.

"Air ye ready?" he demanded, advancing toward Pendergast, and flashing the light in his face.

"Quite ready!" was the low response.

"Remember, 'tain't our wish!" said the scoundrel, apologetically, as he deftly adjusted the noose of the *riata* about Pendergast's neck.

The other end of the rope had previously been passed over the beam above.

"Anything to say?" the fellow questioned.

"Nothing!" the young man replied, endeavoring to commit his soul to his Maker. "If you will murder me, have it over with!"

"Up with him!" came the stern command; and Pendergast, spasmodically struggling, was lifted from his feet by the noose.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HOWLING TOM-CAT.

How long the Tom-cat remained insensible he did not know. When he recovered consciousness he sat up in the dark and tried to recall his position and what had transpired. His head still roared from the effects of the tremendous report and concussion.

"The Tarant'ly's blowed up the house!" he declared, as recollection dawned. "How he done it, though, gits me! He must 'a' had help. Somebody untied him. An' hyer I am, half-way down the shaft, l's'pose, and stuck. An' Pendergast—"

He scrambled to his feet and groped about in the darkness, to see if the cage was so jammed that it could not be moved. He leaped up and down in it, pulled at the cable, and exhausted every device calculated to start it. It refused to budge.

"Stuck!" he exclaimed. "Jest as I thought. Can't git down ner up. That explosion has bulged the walls someway."

But, the Tom-cat was not ready to surrender to despair. Drawing his strong sheath-knife, he knelt down and carefully sounded the floor of the cage. Then, beginning at the point where the iron cable passed through, he attacked the planking with impetuous energy. To cut through the bottom of the cage seemed a tedious and almost hopeless task, but his life, and perhaps Pendergast's, depended on its accomplishment. He did not know how long a time had elapsed since the explosion. Perhaps hours! If so, Pendergast was, no doubt, dead.

Impelled by these thoughts he worked away, ceaselessly but carefully, in the deep gloom of the cage. He knew that he must be cautious. An overstrain, a snapping of the keen blade, would consign him to a lingering and horrible death.

Slowly the hole through which the cable passed was widened and lengthened. The air from the mine came up in feeble waves. Then, when he could get his hands through the aperture, he twisted at the boards with almost savage vigor. They bent under the strain. Leaping to his feet, he stamped heavily with his heels, and the board that had been cut into cracked and groaned under the blows.

But it held fast; and he was forced to again attack it with the knife.

The sweat rolled from him, as he worked. But he heeded it not. The seconds ran into minutes, and the minutes fled, fleet-winged. He was gaining, however! The tiny chips and splinters flew in a shower. At times he heaved with his hands and stamped with his feet; and accomplishing nothing, attacked the boards again with the knife.

His progress was slow, painfully slow, but it was progress. Finally he cut entirely through one of the boards; and by leaping up and down on it, split away a section.

He uttered a cry of delight, as he did so.

"Hooray! I'm gittin' thar. I'm bound to git out o' this hole, sooner er later. Now, ef I on'y knowed Pendergast was still in the land o' the livin'!"

The thought drove him to a renewal of his energetic efforts.

It seemed to him an age almost, since he first attacked the floor of the cage. In reality the time was comparatively short. He had worked furiously and feverishly; as was attested by the

knife-blade, which had fairly become hot under his rapid manipulations.

After splitting away that section, he attacked the remainder of the board and soon had the satisfaction of wrenching it from its place.

"Like a rat in a box!" he muttered, as he began on the next plank. "Makes me think o' an ole, brown rat gnawin' away at midnight. An', like the rat, I'll gnaw through, ef I on'y keep at it long enough!"

His courage had never failed him. Even when the task seemed most hopeless he had cut and hacked away, without a thought of giving up.

The removal of a plank gave him more room in which to work; and the keen blade, propelled by his muscular hands, ate into the heavy planking like a saw.

Soon he was able to split off another section, and a little later he wrenched out the entire board. They were narrow, however, and he could not yet force his body through the opening.

After ten minutes more of hard and exhausting labor, he removed another board, and a little later, another.

"There!" he exclaimed, exultantly, when this had been accomplished. "The way's open. Now to git into the mine! I hope the young chap's still alive, though I'm much afeard he ain't. Seems to me I've been workin' hyer more'n an hour, an' it may be sev'ral sence the explosion."

He thrust the knife into its sheath, leaned over the opening, and explored the place below with his hands. He believed there were other cables, but he could only find the one that passed through the cage.

"I can't stay hyer any longer to find 'em. A minit may mean a good 'eal right now!"

With this he swung his body through the hole, wound his legs around the cable, and prepared for the descent.

He used great caution in doing this. It was possible that the men who had descended with Pendergast were at the bottom of the shaft. If so, they would make short work of him when he appeared.

Grasping the cable with his hands, he commenced to slide down it, slowly and carefully, not knowing what obstruction he might encounter, or what he might find at the bottom.

It was difficult to cling to the stiff cable, but he had a firm and muscular grip, and his entwined legs seemed possessed of prehensile powers. Thus, alternately sliding and stopping to listen, he arrived at the bottom at last.

As he drew himself erect he realized for the first time how greatly exhausted he was. His limbs fairly trembled beneath him, the perspiration covered him, and he was so weak he could scarcely rise.

"Now, to see if the young feller's alive!" he whispered, paying no heed to this feeling, and moving toward the door of the cage. This he pushed open, and peered into the mine. All was gloom and silence.

A great fear came over him. He had expected to find the men near by, with their prisoner, if he found them at all.

He moved out into the mine, and listened. Then he pushed on, uncertain what route to take. Suddenly, in turning an angle, he caught the far away gleam of a lantern. There were figures of men around it.

Drawing his revolvers he crept softly forward.

"It's them!" with an exultant thrill. "An' the young feller's all right yit! But I do b'lieve they're gittin' ready to hang 'im. Git yer claws ready!"

The ominous, cat-like growls, which it seemed impossible for him to restrain in times of peril and excitement, were now issuing from his lips. His eyes blazed; and his fingers worked convulsively over the trigger of his revolver.

He writhed forward, sinuous and terrible, like a panther preparing to leap upon its prey. His exhaustion was forgotten.

Then, as he drew near, he heard the command of the leader, saw the rope tighten and beheld Pendergast swinging in mid-air.

At that his war-cry rung through the gloomy chambers with startling and paralyzing distinctness:

"Whoop! Mariar! Mee-ow! Sp't, sp't, sp't! Mee-ee-ow-ow!"

And, at the same time, his revolvers spouted flame. The leader and one other went down, and the remainder, with yells of fright, darted away, as if a legion of howling fiends was after them.

Pendergast dropped to the rocks, as the rope fell from the hands of the men. The Tom-cat sped by him, screaming his cat-calls, and firing

at every leap. But, he did not follow the fugitives. After a few bounds he turned back, and bent over Pendergast.

"Worth a dozen dead men!" he cried, placing his hand over the heart of the insensible man. "I'll carry him away, so that if any o' them fellers comes back they'll not trouble us. I don't 'low they'll come back, though; fer I never seen men run like they did."

"As fer them chaps," referring to the men slain, "they'll do well enough hyer, I reckon. They died while tryin' to murder a man, an' this mine is a good enough grave fers sich. Ef they's any ruction raised 'bout it by the off'ers I kin pilot the gen'lemen down hyer and show 'em what the critters was up to."

He was not idle while talking. He had slipped the noose from Pendergast's neck; and now proceeded to drag him to a place of greater security. In doing this he recalled the ease with which he had lost his bearings on a previous occasion; and went in the direction of the shaft.

Having placed Pendergast in a comfortable position, the cowboy returned for the lantern, which the men had left behind in their flight. Then he applied himself to the young man's restoration with such success that the latter soon opened his eyes and attempted to sit up.

"Ruther a close call!" declared the Tom-cat, beamingly.

Pendergast rubbed his bruised throat and attempted to speak. After several efforts he regained his utterance.

"Too close altogether for comfort!" he replied. "I suppose I owe my rescue to you. What has become of the rascals?"

"Two of 'em's a-lyin' over yonder!" jerking his thumb in the direction. "T'other ones skipped in a powerful hurry. I calc'late they're a-runnin' yit. I give two er three yawps and opened on 'em with my shooters, an' they jest flew."

"I hated to do it!" the Tom-cat went on, "but it was them er you, an' I figgered that you was wuth a regiment o' sich cattle!"

"It is a serious thing, Tom. Human life is too precious to be recklessly sacrificed, but they certainly deserved their fate, if ever men did."

"Hellow!" the cowboy exclaimed, staring through the darkness. "They're a-comin' back, I do believe, what's left of 'em! An' they've got another lantern! Reckon we'd better git away from hyer. I'm clean beat out, and don't keer to git in another fight, ef I kin help it."

Pendergast twisted around and surveyed the advancing light.

"It can't be!" he asserted. "They wouldn't return in that bold open way."

The Tom-cat had been staring like one dumfounded. All at once he leaped to his feet and made the rocky passage ring with his whoops and cat-calls.

"We're saved!" he yelled. "It's a gang o' our own men comin' after us. How they got in hyer, though, puzzles me! An' how did they know we was hyer an' needin' help?"

"Thank Heaven!" Pendergast exclaimed, rising to his feet with the cowboy's aid. "I was afraid we'd have trouble in getting out of this accursed place. I suppose the house and elevator were destroyed by the explosion."

The rescuing party came straight on, when they heard the Tom-cat's cries; and were now whooping a chorus of encouragement.

"Hyer we air!" he yelled, in reply. "Chipper an' spry as young medder-larks!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE rescuing party, as stated by the cowboy, was composed of the miners which Pendergast had in his employ. They had gained the mine by way of Taulbee's house. The door through which the Tom-cat had seen the Tarantula disappear, led, as Pendergast supposed, into the basement of Taulbee's residence.

"Now, come on!" one of the men exclaimed, as soon as this had been explained. "You're wanted powerful. The whole town's aroused. Sich another blow-up as that was, was never heerd of. The little mine building is spread all over the county."

"One thing at a time!" Pendergast protested.

"How did you know we were in here?"

"Come on! You'll diskoiver quick enough. Ain't got time to talk now."

With this unsatisfactory statement, he led the way toward the door that opened beneath Taulbee's house. Tom and one of the miners assisted Pendergast, and with their aid he got along quite easily.

"You want to be careful that you don't get lost!" the young man warned. "I've been lost in here twice, and don't care for a third experience of that kind."

"Never fear o' that!" the man assured. "Directions given to us war so plain, that a blind man could foller 'em. This place ain't nigh so big down hyer as it 'pears. When you got lost you jes' went round and round, likely. This hole's a good deal in a'pearance like an abandoned coal mine. The metal veins seemed to run ever' which way, and they jes' follered 'em, blastin' an' drillin' ontell the ore played out."

A brisk walk brought them to the wall in which the door was set. It was now open, and they passed readily into the basement. From that they emerged by a stairway into the room above.

"Thunder!" exclaimed the Tom-cat, in some excitement. "This is the very room the Tarant'ly dodged into last night, when he disappeared in that air queer way. He went through this hole into the cellar. An' from thar he could go into the mine. That ruther gits me!"

A glad cry from Dell interrupted him. She rushed into the room and greeted the party—and especially Pendergast—in an almost hysterical way.

"I suppose you know?" she said in answer to their looks of surprise.

"Know?" cried Pendergast. "We don't know anything! And these grinning sinners won't enlighten us. Will you please explain? Who sent them to our rescue? And why do we find you here?"

"I supposed they had told you. No doubt they wanted to make the surprise the greater. But, we haven't much time to talk. The Tarantula of Tombstone is Silas Taulbee himself! And I believe he is dying. He was crushed by a great stone that was hurled upon him as he ran, after firing the fuse that produced the explosion."

Pendergast and the cowboy were too greatly astounded to speak.

"It seems almost impossible, does it not? But, it is so. The explosion aroused the town: and, when Taulbee, in his negro disguise, was found, he was senseless. Some one reported that he was Taulbee's servant and he was carried to this house. Taulbee, of course, could not be found, and soon after he was brought in, dead, as it seemed, Mrs. Taulbee disappeared. No one knows where she is now."

"And she was—" Pendergast ventured.

"She was the pretended fortune-teller. Taulbee has confessed all. The excitement caused by his confession was something phenomenal, for no one had suspected him of such villainy."

"He believes the Tom-cat is dead—that he was killed by the explosion, but he thought you might be alive, for he told his men to wait a certain time for you. As soon as they discovered how to get into the mine, these men hurried away, hoping to be in time."

Her agitated manner showed how she had suffered during their absence.

"Let's go at once to Taulbee!" Pendergast urged. "He may have some communication for us."

Dell piloted them into the quiet little room where the dying man lay. He raised himself slightly as they entered, and his pinched features showed the signs of coming dissolution. The rolls of clothing worn to give the rounded appearance to his body, had been removed; as had also the black coloring from his face and hands.

He could speak only with the greatest difficulty, because of weakness and the injuries to his chest.

"I am glad to see that you both escaped!" he declared, with a wan smile. "I will not have to go to my Maker with your blood on my soul. I hope you will forgive me. I have tried to ask God to do so. It is best that I failed as I did. I see it, now, as I face death."

"I have only a few words! My time is short. The woman who, I learn, has fled, was not my lawful wife, but if she should be taken, I ask that you deal kindly with her. It is the only request I have to make. I have already made a confession that will restore to Miss Devore her property. It was put in writing by an attorney."

"My fate, I trust, will be a warning to other evil-doers. If I had not inaugurated a warfare upon you I might have been able to hold the property, in spite of all your efforts. But my alarm led me to acts that brought about my own downfall. The hand of God was in it. I was fighting against an unsleeping justice. It is the way with criminals. They are ever blindly digging the pits they are themselves to fall into."

He again craved their pardon. And on receiving assurance that it was freely granted, closed his eyes wearily.

They stood there, silently watching. And so quietly did his spirit take its flight, that they were only made aware of the change, by the peaceful expression that came to his countenance.

"Let us not judge him!" said Pendergast softly. "He is with the Great Judge, who never commits errors as we do!"

The Phoenix Mine became the property of Mrs. Julian Pendergast. For, even before the necessary legal formalities were complied with, she was united in marriage to Pendergast the attorney, and for aught I know to the contrary they may still be living in Tombstone.

As for the fugitive, who had been Madame Dumar, the alleged fortune-teller, and Taulbee's professed wife, she was never again heard of by the people of that section.

The men who fled from the cowboy, in the depths of the deserted mine, were captured, as they attempted to leave it, and were duly punished for their several crimes.

The Tom-cat, with a well-filled purse and the plaudits of his fellow-men, returned to his home in Silver City. That he was ready to sally forth at short notice in pursuit of human birds of prey we can well believe—seeing that he was never so happy as when uttering in the moment of greatest danger his war-cry—

"Whoop! Mariar! Mee-ow! Sp't, sp't! Mee-ow-ow!"

THE END.

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- 443 Deadwood Dick, Jr.
- 448 Nickel-Plate Ned; or, Deadwood Dick Jr's Defiance.
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- 491 Prince Pistol, the King of the West; or, Deadwood Dick Jr's Compact.
- 496 Monte Cristo, Jr.; or, Deadwood Dick Jr's Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick's Diggings; or, Dr. Death-Grip's Swoop.
- 508 Deadwood Dick's Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick's Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick's Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick's Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick's Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick Jr. in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr. the Wild West Vidocq.
- 549 Deadwood Dick on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr's Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick Jr. in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick Jr. at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick Jr's Leadville Lay; or, Bristol and Bucket's Boom.

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- 26 Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon.
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- 80 Rosebud Rob; or, Nugget Ned, the Knight.
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- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent.
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- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
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- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
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- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
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- 277 Denver Doll, the Detective Queen.
- 281 Denver Doll's Victory.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decoy; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 291 Turk, the Boy Ferret.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 330 Little Quack-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggersville.
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- 339 Kangaroo Kit's Racket.
- 343 Maubuntan Mike, the Bowery Blood.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
- 368 Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer; or, The Lottery of Life.
- 372 Yreka Jim's Prize.
- 378 Nabob Ned; or, The Secret of Slab City.
- 382 Cool Kit, the King of Kids; or, A Villain's Vengeance.
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- 389 Bicycle Ben; or, The Lion of Lightning Lodge.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
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- 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher.
- 456 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler.

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- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
- 122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
- 126 Peayune Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
- 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
- 142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
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- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
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- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
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- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
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- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
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- 262 The Young Sharps; or, Rollicking Mike's Hot Trail.
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- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
- 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
- 305 Dushaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in the Quaker City.
- 324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
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- 408 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
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- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
- 596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.

BY OLL COOMES.

- 5 Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew.
- 13 The Dumb Spy.
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- 31 Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies.
- 41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.
- 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Fox.
- 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.
- 74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
- 88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunters.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 468 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 478 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.

- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Cora.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tonknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowle.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowle Blade of Cochitopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pardos; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
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- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Fox.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
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- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampires; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
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- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Vidocq.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
- 594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.

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- 7 The Flying Yankee; or, The Ocean Outcast.
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- 24 Diamond Dirk; or, The Mystery of the Yellowstone.
- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenants.
- 75 The Boy Dnelli; or, The Cruise of the Sea-Wolf.
- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Boy Smuggler.
- 111 The Sea-Devil; or, The Midshipman's Legacy.
- 116 The Hussar Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
- 197 Little Grit; or, Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.
- 204 Gold Plume; or, The Kid-Glove Sport.
- 216 Blason Bill, the Prince of the Reins.
- 222 Grit, the Bravo Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
- 229 Crinsson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 237 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
- 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 264 The Floating Feather; or, Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, The Chace of "The Gold Ship."
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
- 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Long Trail.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 398 Seawall, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isador, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
- 412 The Wild Yachtsman; or, The War-Cloud's Cruise.
- 429 Duncan Dare, the Boy Refugee.
- 433 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
- 437 The Sea Raider.
- 441 The Ocean Firefly; or, A Middy's Vengeance.
- 446 Haphazard Harry; or, The Scapgrace of the Sea.
- 450 Wizard Will; or, The Boy Ferret of New York.
- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
- 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
- 474 Florat; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferret's Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
- 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 503 The Royal Middy; or, The Shark and the Sea Cat.
- 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
- 520 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
- 530 The Buckskin Bovers.
- 535 The Buc skin Rovers.
- 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
- 545 Lieutenant Leo, the Son of Lafitte.
- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 The Creole Corsair.
- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingdom, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
- 575 The Surgeon-Scout Detective.
- 580 The Outcast Cadet; or, The False Detective.
- 586 The Buckskin Avenger.
- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea Rover.
- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
- 602 The Vagabond of the Mines.
- 607 The Rover Detective; or, Keno Kit's Champions.

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- 19 The Phantom Spy; or, The Pilot of the Prairie.
- 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout.
- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

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